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African Skeletons at Jamestown

The recent issue of CRM: Cultural Resource Management (Vol. 22, No.1) focuses on the Jamestown Archaeological Assessment. The issue includes a brief report by Dr. Douglas W. Owsley of the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History on the analysis of 15 sets of human remains recovered during archaeological investigations at Jamestown, including the remains of two individuals recently discovered inside James Fort.

The analysis brought new analytical techniques to bear on the remains previously recovered at the site. The demographic composition of the group was assessed with the sex of 12 of the individuals being determined and the age revised for 10. Seven of the individuals had previously been identified as Native American and the remainder had been unidentified. Reanalysis using modern classification methods and comparison databases resulted in the identification of five Africans and the confirmation of only three Native Americans. These Africans were among the first brought to North America.

Of special interest were the nearly complete remains of a male African, 23 to 27 years of age. This individual suffered from advanced tertiary syphilis. ~However, this disease was not the cause of death. The frontal bone of the skull evidenced a circular defect with radiating wedge-shaped fractures indicating the entry point of a projectile, with additional fractures at the exit site. Radiographs revealed fragments of metal surrounding the wound site. This young man had clearly died from a gun shot to the head.

To Dr. Owsley these results argue the importance of complete analysis of human remains, including those held in "old" collections. However, they also appear to be indicative of the violence that accompanied the forced importation of Africans to America.