A WINDOW INTO EARLY VIRGINIA HISTORY

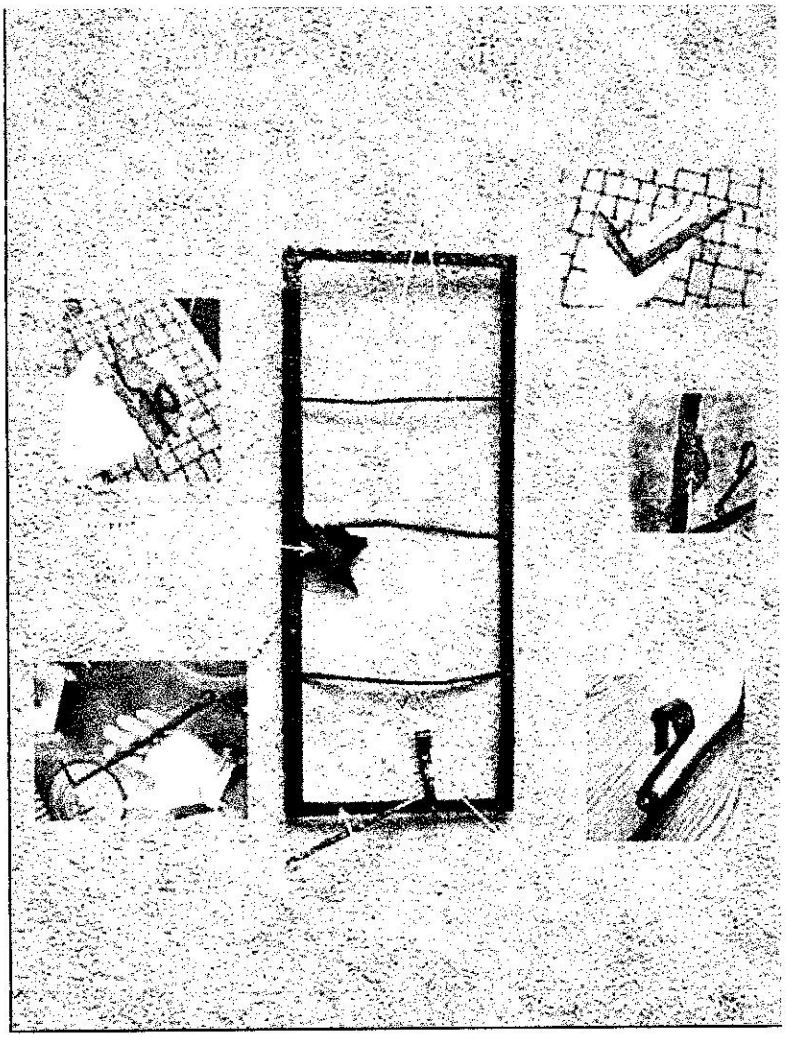
Colonial-era trash pits provide layers of history and a glimpse into life in the17th century. But sometimes those glimpses are bigger than usual.

By Bill Dancy

Since the initial publication of my *Discovering Virginia's Colonial Artifacts* book over four years ago, I've pretty much relegated my detector to the closet and begun focusing solely on searching for and excavating early trash pits. I've always enjoyed this fascinating aspect of the hobby, as the possibilities for new discoveries are endless. Plus it provides the opportunity to unearth unique, non-metallic objects not capable of being found with a detector — such as glass, ceramics and even clay pipes.

My good friend Stan Dameron and I have directed our attention the last couple of years on two amazing sites that Stan has graciously shared with me, and we have moved an incredible amount of dirt to reach the abundance of 17th century artifacts that were hidden at both. One of these locations contains the remnants of an early colonial cellar that's being exposed by the rapidly eroding shoreline along a major tidal river here in eastern Virginia. The first evidence of this structure was the sudden appearance of an amazing multi-colored Flemish (Dutch) brick floor along with its accompanying collapsed brick walls, and we've been slowly excavating this spot over the last year and a half. In addition to this feature it appears the cellar was expanded and a second room was added at a later date that utilized a reddish brick floor. The overall dimensions of both rooms is about 30 feet wide by 15 feet long and the floor sits about four feet below grade.

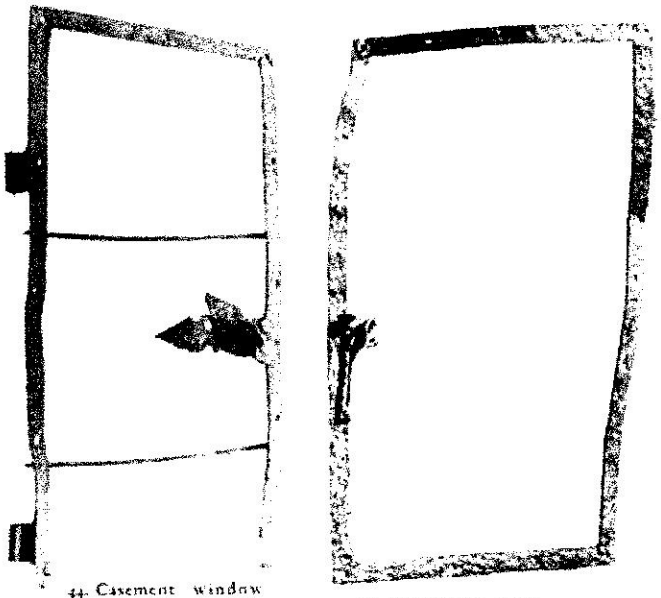
The fill within this feature has contained a few artifact hotspots with several complete late-1600s onion bottles, marked bottle seals, a variety of earthenware, and iron tools.



These artifacts were recovered mostly by eyeballing, as well as through sifting and checking spoils piles with a detector. Once we eventually wrap up our excavation, which may take quite a while longer, I plan to publish a lengthy paper or article to document our many experiences and finds here.

However, for now, I'd like to focus on just a single and rarely seen recovery that I'm still quite in awe over. During one of our first visits here in June 2020 I was looking to continue my streak of finding more of the interesting iron artifacts that had been turning up, but it was a rather slow day with nothing earth-shattering revealing itself. Eventually I ran across a heavy piece of iron bar which was only about 18" below the surface, and I initially assumed it was probably something broken off from modern farm equipment. But I had also been finding small shards of 1600s ceramics directly above it, which made things a bit more intriguing. As I continued the difficult digging through tough weed roots, packed oyster shells and collapsed wall brick, I began to realize this object was much larger than anticipated. It ended up taking a full two hours of hard digging more than three feet into the bank before locating the other end of the mystery object. Once it was finally extricated I realized it was a very early and completely intact iron casement window frame (36" tall x 14½" wide) with its components still largely intact. By definition, a casement is a window that's attached to its frame by one or more hinges on the side. To my

After a lengthy and difficult extraction, the mystery object in the trash pit turned out to be a complete 17th century casement window frame. It is shown in the above photo just after it was pulled from the ground. Only two other known examples have been recovered during archaeological excavations in Virginia, as shown below in the book, Here Lies Virginia, *by Ivor Hume, 1963.*



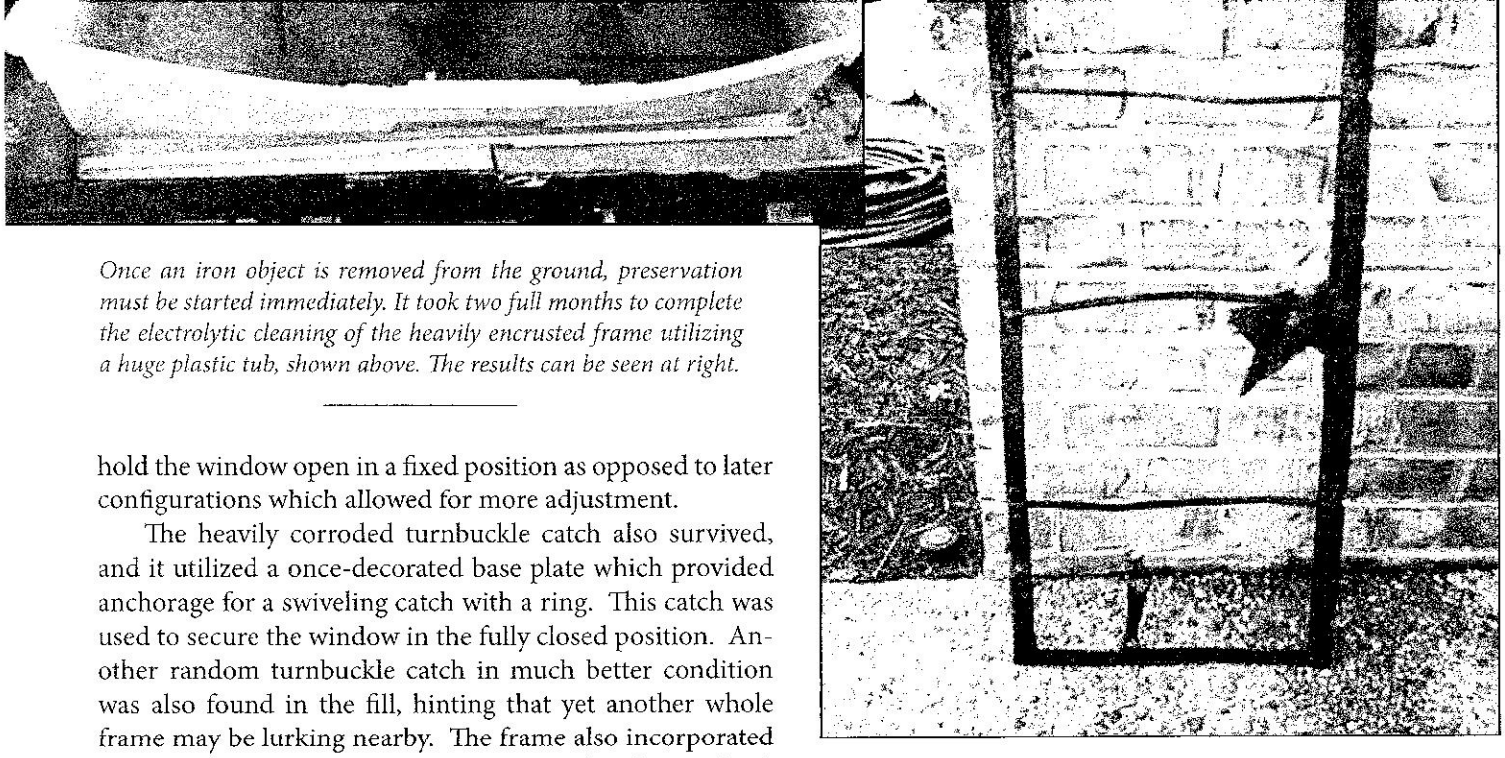
44. Casement window frame found in the debris of Corotoman.

45. Casement window frame found at Jamestown.

knowledge, only two similar examples have been recovered during archaeological excavations in Virginia; one of those coming from historic Jamestown and the other from Robert "King" Carter's home Corotoman on the Northern Neck.

Once home I did a little research and quickly confirmed it dated to the late 17th century as it perfectly matched an example shown on a UK antique shop website. It was also found in the same context as other artifacts dating to this general period. The frame was heavily encrusted and I carefully used a small wire brush, putty knife, and Dremel tool to remove most of the loose surface corrosion, and then placed it in a large plastic tub to begin the long, slow process of electrolytic cleaning. After a full two months it was as clean as I could get it without risking eating away some of the base metal, although some stubborn spots of heavy corrosion could not be totally removed. After some final hand cleaning and thorough drying I applied four coats of polyurethane which will hopefully preserve it for at least a few years.

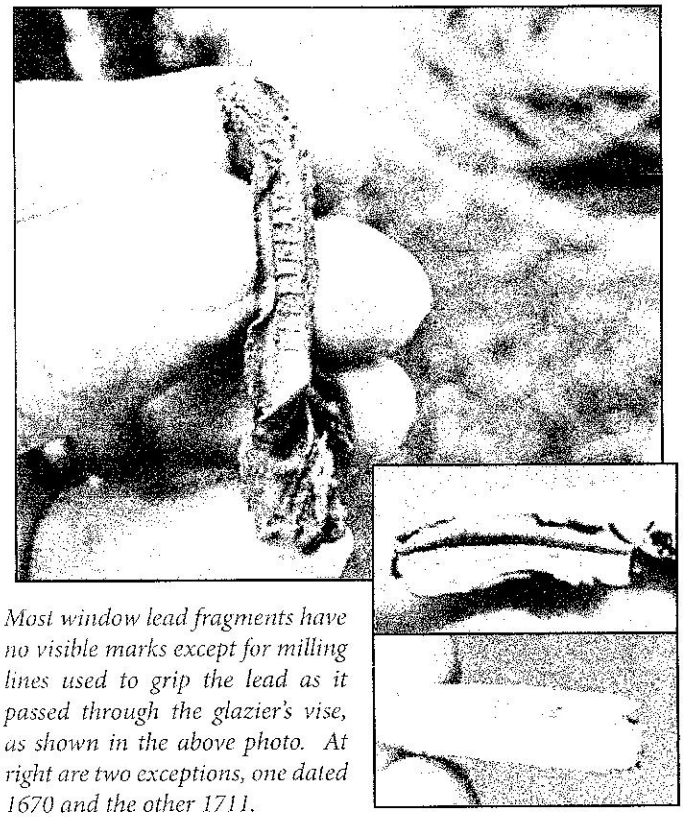
After this task was completed I turned my attention to some of the components of the frame as I wanted to learn more about their specific functions. Attached to the frame base is what's called a "tulip leaf" handle which was used for opening and shutting the window. A small hole can be found in the base of the handle for insertion of the pointed end of a "hook stay"—a long, hooked rod used for holding the window open. The other end of the stay is looped and would be secured to a bracket mounted on the outer sill. These are usually plain, like a large screen door latch, but I was able to recover a more unique, early example with a decorative twisted shaft. This type of stay can only be used to



Once an iron object is removed from the ground, preservation must be started immediately. It took two full months to complete the electrolytic cleaning of the heavily encrusted frame utilizing a huge plastic tub, shown above. The results can be seen at right.

hold the window open in a fixed position as opposed to later configurations which allowed for more adjustment.

The heavily corroded turnbuckle catch also survived, and it utilized a once-decorated base plate which provided anchorage for a swiveling catch with a ring. This catch was used to secure the window in the fully closed position. Another random turnbuckle catch in much better condition was also found in the fill, hinting that yet another whole frame may be lurking nearby. The frame also incorporated three horizontal "saddle bars" which added to the window's structural integrity. These bars have a square cross section, which dates them to the 1600s. Lastly, portions of the two hinges used to attach the window to the wooden frame still remain, and these were likely hung on iron pintles protruding from the window framing. A nice example of a pintle also turned up in the fill.



Most window lead fragments have no visible marks except for milling lines used to grip the lead as it passed through the glazier's vise, as shown in the above photo. At right are two exceptions, one dated 1670 and the other 1711.

Other miscellaneous window components turned up as well, and these included many broken pieces of bluish-green window glass which are found in abundance at nearly all colonial sites. Glass in the early colonies was quite expensive, difficult to obtain and considered a luxury, and was almost always imported from England as nearly all attempts at establishing early glassworks in the colonies had failed. The early windows also tended to be rather small not just due to their cost, but also because of their poor insulating qualities. Some probate inventories in the 17th century actually listed casement windows as they were considered removable items since they could be easily lifted off the iron pintles protruding from the frame and reused elsewhere, and were valued along with other household contents.

In the 17th century the manufacturing process restricted the size of windowpanes so glass was generally cut into small diamond, rectangular or square shapes known as "quarries" which was a tradition dating back to medieval times. These panes were fitted into strips of lead, known as "cames," that had been drawn through a special vise or hand-mill to form "H" shaped channels which provided support and stability for the glass. In this manner larger windows could be custom created to fit the need. Glassless windows stretched

While the window was the rarest find, it was not the only notable artifact to come from the site. The property farm manager, Ronnie Russell, found these two examples of early onion bottles that had washed out from the bank in the vicinity of the cellar floor. Careful digging revealed this amazing whole black glass onion bottle (right) in the cellar fill. On the following page is excavation of the site in progress. Pit digging is not for the physically unfit or lazy.

---

with oilpaper were also commonly utilized due to the scarcity and expense of actual glass windows, but their function was reduced to simply providing a source of ambient light.

Speaking of window leads, I recalled from years ago that they sometimes included a stamped date of manufacture along with the maker's initials, although it's uncertain if these initials represent the glazier or the vise manufacturer. Surprisingly, archaeological studies have shown that generally only about 10-20 percent of window leads were marked, but this may be the result of it not becoming a practice until about 1661. However, there are some unique cases where both the vise maker's and glazier's initials appear together alongside the date. They provide an invaluable tool for helping to date a structure or site as they're one of the rare artifacts outside of coins that bear a date. However, in all the window leads I had examined over the years I'd never found an example with these marks, but some did reveal milling lines used to grip the lead as it passed through the glazier's vise.

With a little additional research, including viewing a very educational video from the Jamestown Rediscovery website, I realized I was not looking in the right place for the marks. Instead of being stamped on one of the outside sections of the lead strip, this information was actually hidden on one side of the bar of the "H" which is always obscured from view due to the mangled nature of these items, as they came from their hostile, discarded environment. Unfortunately, I may have tossed out a bunch of these over the years, but was able to put my hands on a few examples to experiment with.

I quickly found out that trying to check for initials and dates on window leads is a very tedious and painstaking process due to their poor condition as well as their soft yet brittle nature. I found what works best is to use either a sharp toothpick or my thumbnail to slowly and methodically pry open the legs of the "H" to reveal the narrow channels hidden inside.

After working with several examples I was finally able to uncover dates and initials on two of the leads. The first was dated 1711 and included the initials "EW." After a bit of research I was able to determine these letters represented Edward White who was actually a vise manufacturer and not a glazier. His marks have been found on leads dating from 1677 to 1717.

A second lead was dated 1670 with an unidentifiable maker's mark of "IG." These discoveries were quite exciting and I highly encourage anyone who recovers these unsuspecting pieces of history to make sure they do not get discarded. For those wishing to learn more about marked window leads, including a demonstration on how to access and identify these marks, I encourage you to check out the Jamestown Rediscovery video at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lVpIaf95Pk

Since all the glaziers and vise makers of the period were applying their craft apparently only in England, it is assumed that casement windows were manufactured there as complete units and then shipped to the colonies as opposed to being assembled here. This probably resulted in a lengthy time lag between when the window leads were dated, and when the final product was actually put into use in a colonial structure. This lag has been estimated by researchers to be as long as several years, so the lesson here is that window lead dates do not necessarily provide a precise date of construction for the structure in which they were installed.

Window lead dates do not always imply initial construction as they could represent a replacement window at an older structure, or they possibly could have been removed from one location and reused at another. But in most cases it does provide a reasonably accurate means for dating a site. By the early 1700s vertically sliding single-hung windows with the top sash fixed replaced the use of iron casements. Double-hung windows became the predominant style by the end of the 18th century, and these continue to be in popular use today.

I sometimes find myself daydreaming about who might have lived at this site 350 years ago, and visualize them reaching out to open the catch and grab the handle to swing this window open, and allowing a refreshing breeze from the river to cool things off on a warm summer day. Putting together that personal connection with any recovered artifact is one of the most satisfying aspects of this crazy passion Stan and I share. And this fascinating find most certainly validates this feeling as it literally provides a "window" into Virginia's early history.

Living in southeast Virginia, **Bill Dancy** spends most of his free time researching and hunting colonial sites, including the excavation of early trash pits. He is also a consultant to *American Digger*® magazine and is the author of the highly acclaimed book, *Discovering Virginia's Colonial Artifacts.*