More than three and a half centuries ago, a surprise attack devastated a fragile colonial outpost—Virginia’s Wolstenholme Towne

New Clues to an Old Mystery

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THAT WAS NO WAY to treat a lady," I thought when first I saw her lying in the rubbish pit. We had known for a full two weeks that the bones of the woman were there, after we were sure that she was more than an isolated leg; but it was not until I caught influenza that I realized how she died.

The lady we came to know as "Granny in the Ground" was the last of countless surprises that had kept us on our archaeological toes for four years, as we scraped away the centuries to reach Friday, March 22, 1622, and the ashes of Virginia’s Wolstenholme Towne.

On that Friday more than three and a half centuries ago, a surprise Indian attack had devastated this fragile outpost and left at least 58 of its English settlers dead. Although a handful of survivors returned and a few replacement families were sent out to repopulate Martin’s Hundred, as the surrounding plantation was called, Wolstenholme Towne was never rebuilt, and before long both its name and location were forgotten.

The story of how the search for later colonial remains at Carter’s Grove plantation on the James River led to the discovery of the oldest British-American town plan yet excavated has been told in a previous NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC article. Reader responses to it came back to us from around the world, some offering valuable new avenues for research, others asking “What happened in the end?”

A reader in Pakistan told of finding distilling apparatus like the still head we had discovered on our first site; another had seen a stoneware jug from the 1628 wreck of Sweden’s Vasa that he believed matched one we had found. Then came word from Bermuda of jars from a 1609 shipwreck paralleling fragments found in the fort at Wolstenholme Towne. Piece by piece, our puzzle was fitting together to

(Continued on page 90)

provoked beyond endurance by encroachment on their land, Indians of the Powhatan Chiefdom rose against British colonists in 1622. The author theorizes how one woman was attacked and left to die (left); her skeleton was found outside a homestead near Wolstenholme Towne, a settlement first described in a previous GEOGRAPHIC article. New evidence, as well as information sent by readers, now adds to the story.

WOLSTENHOLME TOWNE grew, expanded by four years of diligent archaeological spadework. The village, headquarters of a plantation called Martin’s Hundred, proved the oldest British-American town plan yet excavated when discovered on the much later site of Carter’s Grove near Williamsburg. A core of 30 to 40 settlers peopled the town, shown during its construction around 1620.

Early digging revealed the site of a cottage (above, lower left), a company compound including a longhouse and a store, at center, and beyond, a palisaded fort. To that scene has been added the largest single building—the company barn, at upper left. There the colonists probably stored their exports of tobacco and lumber prior to shipping them to England. The position of the barn adds weight to the author’s belief that the town plan paralleled a design used by English colonists in Ireland during the same period.

An equally dramatic find, discovered after the painting’s completion, was what the archaeologists dubbed the “Suburb” (far left). Postholes define a homestead where at least seven people died. Four were buried together, probably victims of a contagion. But the others may have met a violent end, including the woman depicted on page 52, the grim discovery reinforced by signs that the house had burned, probably put to the torch.
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An equally interesting site is that of the background.
Evidence stretching around the world

Wolstenholme Towne

Though the hub of Martin's Hundred was destroyed by Indians in 1622, some farms lived on to become part of 18th-century Carter's Grove.

St. Eustatius

Found on this tiny island, colonized by the Dutch in 1636, a piece of tin-glazed earthenware (in hand) matched the design of a Martin's Hundred plate.

Bermuda

Cardiff, Wales

Brass brazier in the National Museum of Wales (left) has a handle so similar to another from the settlement (below left) that both may have been made by the same craftsman.

St. Eustatius

Withyham, England

Gabled tombs at the Church of St. Michael and All Angels hint at a precedent for the style of colonists' coffins. A vault beneath the church gave direct evidence of A-shaped lids.

Rotterdam

A famous Dutch dissident escaped from prison in 1621, using as a disguise a bricklayer's jacket with buttons that matched and dated this one found in the Wolstenholme Suburb.

Ankara, Turkey

The search for proof that 17th-century coffins at Martin's Hundred had been made with gabled lids, rather than flat ones, led to the Middle East. There a Turkish carpenter carries on an old tradition, building coffins with A-shaped lids that may echo the way English colonists were buried in Virginia.

Western Australia

The 1629 wreck of the Dutch East Indianman Batavia on a coral reef of the Wadjabi Group yielded this German stoneware bottle. Its decorative coat of arms matches fragments from the Wolstenholme Suburb.

Dalkey, Ireland

A Geographic reader's family records told of an ancestor who had been a licensed distiller in an Irish settlement, suggesting that the more than 100 broken bottles at a Martin's Hundred site may have been those of a distiller. From Stockhol, another reader tied such wares to those of a 1628 Swedish wreck, the Vasa.
A web of evidence stretching around the world.

MORE QUESTIONS than answers were often raised by fragments of glass, pottery, or metal found on sites across Martin's Hundred and in Wolstenholme Towne. What precise period of settlement did they indicate? Had they examples elsewhere?

Verifying ties came from a Dutch shipwreck off Australia, from a mountainous Caribbean island, and from England and Turkey, even from the grave. After the first GEOGRAPHIC article on the settlement's discovery, readers wrote to offer help based on their family histories or from artifacts seen elsewhere.

Tower of London
An early 17th-century pilgrim's amored collar called a gorget, shown by Yeoman Warder Joe Hubbard, provided fascinating details needed to reconstruct fragments of another gorget found at Wolstenholme Towne.

Karachi, Pakistan
A reader wrote that this still head, or alembic, from the settlement recalled similar distilling methods long practiced in the East.

Wolstenholme Towne
Though the hub of Martin's Hundred was destroyed by Indians in 1622, some farms lived on to become part of 18th-century Carter's Grove.

Cardiff, Wales
Brass brooch in the National Museum of Wales (left) has a handle similar to another from the settlement (below left) that both may have been made by the same craftsman.

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Western Australia
The 1629 wreck of the Dutch East Indiaman Batavia on a coral reef of the Wallabi Group yielded this German stoneware bottle. Its decorative coat of arms matches fragments from the Wolstenholme Suburb.
(Continued from page 53)  create a picture of life on the frontier of European civilization at the beginning of the 17th century.

Before we were through, the net of evidence would reach from an Australian reef to a military arsenal in central Europe, to the foreshore of the Thames at London, by way of a Turkish coin, and builder, and an ingenious escape from a Dutch prison.

Meanwhile, the digging was still going on. By the winter of 1978 we had found what we believed to be Wolstenholme's fort, as well as a row-house building we identified as a dwelling for settlement employees, plus a store, one tenant's home, and 16 graves. We knew from the records that there had been a church, but we hadn't found it.

BOTH DOCUMENTARY and physical evidence told us that the banks of the James River have been heavily eroded through the centuries, receding as much as a yard a year. The bluff on which Wolstenholme stood may have been reduced by 280 feet or more since the early 17th century, meaning that if its buildings once reached to the shore, we now have only half of the site left. Even so, the settlement could never have been very large and was unlikely to have housed more than about 40 people.

Remembering that those who set out in 1618 aboard the ship Gift of God numbered no more than 220, and that according to the records the total Martin's Hundred population at any one time never exceeded 280, a settlement of 40 people makes sense. After all, grants to the Society of Martin's Hundred gave it at least 21,500 acres, and its English settlers were there to clear, build, and farm on behalf of London shareholders, not to cluster in a knot at the river's edge.

Everything pointed to Wolstenholme Towne (which was really no more than a village) being only the administrative center for Martin's Hundred. It was the seat of its governor, William Harwood, the place where the company's employees lived, where its supplies were housed, where its produce was collected prior to shipment, and where the settlers could take refuge—if they had time.

By the spring of 1979 we had found nine sites and excavated four. Of the remainder, the one we called Site D was the most inviting; test trenches had yielded some of the best quality potsherds found anywhere in Martin's Hundred, pointing to the presence there of someone of stature in this mini-colony. First, however, project supervisor Eric Klingelhofer reminded me that the 1971 testing had located yet another site—designated H—closer to the village.

"But, I countered, "all they found was a single hole in the ground: only one potsher, a couple of musket balls, and some rotted tree branches—perhaps a 17th-century hunting blind."

I knew, Eric replied. "But before we pull up all our water-hose lines, I have a feeling we ought to take another look." He used the hoses to wet the clay subsoil and show up faint discolorations created by backfilled postholes. The water also softened the sun-baked surface enough for it to be scraped with hoes and trowels.

Reluctantly I agreed to divide the crew and work both sites simultaneously. Crew members assigned to Eric's quest grumbled at being left out of the action about to begin at Site D. For three years my wife, Audrey, the project historian, had been urging us to move there, believing that it would yield much more information about the development of the Hundred. I did not doubt that she was right. Although marked D on our maps, it was always referred to as "Audrey's Site," the place where all lost truths would be revealed unto us.

After a month's scraping in 100°F shade
less heat, one more truth emerged. Site D was barren. Meanwhile, back on Site H, artifacts and postholes were showing up everywhere.

The hunters' pit turned out to be a grave, and the rotted tree branches the bones of four people—the first multiple burial recovered from an early 17th-century colonial site in Virginia. All evidence pointed to hasty, clothed burial, unusual in that day, and probably due to fear of contagious disease. The bodies had been laid head to toe in a manner paralleled in an English engraving showing the burial of London plague victims in 1665. I was sure that this had to be the explanation for our central row of nails.

Further research convinced me that the A-shaped lids were so designed to enable decorated nails driven over them to be seen to make the general procession made its way to the grave. Such ceremony would not have accompanied Site B's infant to its little grave only ten feet from the house. No, the box was made that way because tradition dictated it. To prove my point, however, I had to find a surviving gable-lidded coffin in an English burial vault, whose construction and nail placement I could measure and draw.

But where was I to find such a vault? I sought permission to explore the crypts of Westminster Abbey but was told that I could do so only if I could first prove that such a coffin existed there! Acting on the advice of the Bishop of London, I sought the help of the Council for Places of Worship which, in turn, referred my inquiry to a distinguished professional archaeologist, who stated with conviction that "there is no hope of Mr. Hume finding an A-lidded coffin in any vault in England. Such coffins were never generally used in England."

WE WERE NOT ALONE. Letters to archaeologists and historians in England yielded no descriptions of how 17th-century coffins were built; but as had happened so often in the course of our research, clues were to be found in paintings, engravings, and woodcuts of contemporary life. Some came from cautious broadsheets warning against the horrors of plague, and all showed coffins whose lids were not flat but gabled (next page). I was sure this had to be the explanation for our central row of nails.

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I SHALL NEVER BE quite sure why I persisted. But by this time my quest had become an obsession akin to that of Herman Melville's Captain Ahab in his pursuit of the white whale. I was sure I was right. Didn't I have pictures to prove it? At the same time I had to admit that gable lids would have been much more trouble to make, and peaked coffins could not have been stacked on top of one another in vaults and tombs. That problem was in Audrey's mind when she read that earlier in the present century author Victoria Sackville-West had visited the vault of her ancestors in the church at Withyham in Sussex, and there had gone into a small, sunlit underground chamber beneath the church, among grey veils of cobwebs [where] the coffins of the Sackvilles are stacked on shelves...."

If housed on shelves, the coffins were unlikely to be piled one upon another. Furthermore, Audrey had discovered that at least two Sackvilles had been interred there in our period—the first half of the 17th century. I sought family permission to open the vault, first from Lord Sackville and then from its custodian, Earl De La Warr. Permission was granted, and Lord De La Warr volunteered to open the vault personally.

When the moment came and we descended the steps beneath the Sackville chapel, my heart sank. Before us stretched rows of great, velvet-covered coffins, their
Tale of a nail: Why, in the case of every settler worthy of a coffin, had nails (below) fallen in a row along the skeleton's center after the lid rotted? The lids were not flat but gabled, the author deduced, and probed crypts in distant parts of the world to prove it.

Coffins in a 1651 English broadside that foretold the Great Plague of 1665 gave a clue (above). From the Sackville family vault in England came the proof (facing page). Gardener Robert Snashfold lights up the leaden inner casket, dated 1649, of the infant daughter of the fifth Earl of Dorset. The outer lid was probably thus crafted to display a funeral pall.

hardware royally gilded, some with coronets resting on their lids—their flat lids. Then I saw that there were more. The coffins lay two and three deep on the shelves, the most recent to the front. Those that were oldest had lost their wood, and only their lead linings remained. But one of those lead boxes was gable lidded.

While I was still examining it and searching for any clue to its date, Audrey had moved farther down the line of shelves. "Here's another!" she cried. "And it has an inscription!"

With the help of Lord De La Warr and his gardener, Robert Snashfold, we lifted the leaden box out onto a table in the middle of the vault, and wiped the dust from the inscribed panel identifying it as the coffin of three-year-old Lady Anne Sackville, daughter of the fifth Earl of Dorset. She had died in 1649 (right).

Here at last was physical proof that gable-lidded coffins did exist in 17th-century England. Alas, any evidence of their wood and nail placement had been swept out of the Sackville vault in an enthusiastic bout of spring cleaning earlier in the present century. But we were not done yet. In Egypt, in July 1980, the Shah of Iran went to his grave in a gable-lidded coffin, and a week later two murdered Turkish politicians had been pictured in similar coffins. Writing from his great archaeological site at Aphrodisias in Turkey, Professor Kenan T. Erim has since shown us that gable-lidded coffins built in Turkey today parallel our reconstructions of the Martin's Hundred remains.

That electrifying moment when, after years of searching, one cries "Eureka!" should linger to be savored again and again, yet almost at once I felt a sense, not of elation, but of loss. The excitement of the chase had been more satisfying than the kill. Fortunately for us, however, we had other white whales to hunt.

OUT OF A RUBBISH-LADEN pit on our suburban site came a plate from a suit of armor, a piece known as a tasset and worn over the upper thigh. Such plates normally were made in one of two types, but this was a hybrid for which we could find no match in museum collections. We had had the same problem in 1977 and
Arms and armor retired for 300 years led the author to Graz, Austria, capital of the province of Styria. It served as a bulwark of Europe’s defense against the Ottoman Turks in the 16th and 17th centuries. In 1749, after the wars were won, Austria’s Empress Maria Theresa decreed that the arsenal forever be preserved as a memorial to Styrian bravery. Here, amid nearly 30,000 weapons and pieces of armor, the author found parallels for those used by Wolstenholme Towne’s soldiers of misfortune. Their helmets are echoed by those of cavalry armor, foreground. A powder flask from the settlement matches the ones hanging along horizontal beams above two racks of matchlock muskets. Inverted helmets called cabassets, the standard infantryman’s “pot,” stud the ceiling.

New Clues to an Old Mystery
A storehouse of arms and armor casts further light on Wolstenholme

MISSING LINKS to the settlers’ weaponry were forged by the stunning collection at Graz. Chief conservator August Gschiel (above) services an Austrian helmet made in 1601, similar to one from the settlement in Virginia (above right). Asked if the arsenal could match a Martin’s Hundred scourer for cleaning musket barrels (right), curator Peter Krems replied that he had more than 800, and showed how one screwed into a ramrod (far right).

“I was utterly floored by Graz,” says the author. He had begun his search at more famous museums such as the Tower of London. There he was unable to find close parallels with the ordinary-type armor of Wolstenholme Towne. The settlement’s armor represents a transitional phase in a period when armor was becoming heavier, yet covered less of the body, as gunpowder played an increasing role in warfare. Mr. Noël Hume’s attention was riveted when he finally saw the rank-and-file pieces at Graz: “It was as if the Austrian quartermaster had assembled the collection especially for me.”

1978 when we had found our two close helmets. It became evident that little attention had been paid to run-of-the-mill munition armor used in Europe in the first quarter of the 17th century. As one distinguished curator put it: “If it is not pretty, it is not interesting.” Time and again experts looked at our drawings, shook their heads, and asked: Have you tried Graz?

At Graz, Austria, there survives a collection of nearly 30,000 weapons and pieces of armor (pages 64–5), assembled not by museum curators interested in the art of the armor but by 16th- and 17th-century quartermasters outfitting Austrian forces against the invading Turks.

In the Landeszeughaus, provincial arsenal, at Graz we were to find our link. Here were the closest parallels to our helmets. Here, too, powder flasks with nozzles like ours hung from the beams like bats in a cave. A tool called a scourer, used to clean musket barrels, had turned up on Site H. But although the device was known to us from 17th-century drawings, not one survived in the armory at the Tower of London. I showed it at once, he produced six of different sizes, one exactly like ours (left). “Do you have any more?” I asked.

“More than 800,” he replied. As I looked down the seemingly endless racks of matchlock muskets, I thought that this must have been how the Tower of London’s armory looked when James I ordered it to provide the Virginia Company with replacements for equipment lost in the 1622 Indian uprising.

Some of our problems had persisted for years without our getting any closer to a solution. One was the meaning of more than a hundred broken glass bottles found on the site we believed to have been the home of Governor Harwood. No known inventory from this period shows any Virginia household possessing more than five.

It was a National GEOGRAPHIC reader who offered a plausible answer. Writing from Dalkey, in County Dublin, Ireland, Miss Jane Protheroe-Beynon explained that she was a descendant of Sir John Jephson, an Englishman who had controlled a Munster plantation in 1610. Quoting family records, she showed that he had been granted a license to sell all wine, ale, beer, and aqua vitae to that settlement for a yearly license fee of two pounds, ten shillings. Could this explain the presence on our site of all those bottles and the equipment needed to distill alcohol? asked Miss Protheroe-Beynon. It certainly could—though we have yet to find a comparable document from Virginia.

The bottles in question, being flat sided, were extremely fragile and rarely survive intact. We knew of no whole specimens that could be dated to this early period until, following another reader’s lead, I went to Stockholm to examine artifacts from the 1628 wreck of the warship Vasa. One of its glass bottles closely paralleled ours.

SHIPWRECKS are usually thought of as sources of treasure—chests bursting with gems and Spanish gold; but to the archaeologist they offer something far more valuable: capsules of contemporary life arrested at a single, horrifying moment as the ship went down. Two Bermudian wrecks held particular promise for us. One had been on its way to Virginia in 1609, and the other was lost in 1619 while anchored in Castle Harbour.

The older of the two wrecks is by far the more famous. The Sea Venture ran onto a reef after a hurricane, giving William Shakespeare an opening scene for The Tempest. It gave me evidence that a distinctive kind of jar, made in the west of England, was on its way to America as early as 1609. That was comforting to know, because we had found fragments of several of them in Wolstenholme’s fort.

More important to us, however, was the evidence being brought up by diver Teddy Tucker from the wreck in Castle Harbour.

Tucker believed the ship to be the Warwick, which had been dashed against the cliffs late in November 1619, after bringing a new governor to the island. Most of the cargo had already been off-loaded, but a wide range of objects remained—including tobacco pipes. To me these were the real treasure. They were of the same shape and size as several found in the Wolstenholme fort well, suggesting that ours could easily have been in the fort before the Indians attacked in 1622.
TIME CAPSULE, but is it the correct one? Off Bermuda the author and diver Teddy Tucker study a piece of a child's from a wreck (right), possibly the English Warwick sunk in 1619. Roman potsherds (far right) may have been scooped up with its ballast. Other artifacts are similar to the settlement's; thus, the wreck's identity is important in dating them.

Sweden's Titanic, the 200-foot Vasa was the pride of that nation's navy in 1628 when it sank on its maiden voyage from Stockholm. Raised in 1961, the ship drew the author (above, left) to confer with Dr. Hans Soop, a curator supervising the vessel's restoration.

While the Vasa was settling to the bottom, colonists of Martin's Hundred who had survived the 1622 attack—as a handful did—were throwing out broken bottles. Fragments of them, found at the Suburb and another site, closely paralleled a glass bottle found on the Vasa (above left). The ship also contained buckles, thimbles, and other evidence to date similar Virginia artifacts.
But was Tucker's wreck the Warwick? A few of the artifacts said "No," but most said "Maybe"—among them some of the least likely artifacts to be found on a 17th-century ship or in Bermudian waters at any date: five sherds of Roman pottery. An explanation was offered by clusters of ballast pebbles clinging to iron artifacts. I knew that coarse gravel from the Thames at London was often used for ships' ballast, gravel that even today is dredged up mixed with coins and potsherds from Roman Londinium.

I dived on the wreck myself, carefully removed a sample of ballast pebbles from the ship's planking, and sent it to the Geological Museum in London.

The Thames shore once was as familiar to me as the postholes of Wolstenholme Towne. Revealed at low tide were the discarded artifacts of 2,000 years of city life, everything from Roman jewelry to World War II incendiary bombs. Today, most of the metal objects have gone, salvaged by electronically guided treasure hunters. But the potsherds are still there, most of them dating from the Tudor and Stuart centuries.

I was to learn to my chagrin that I was far more familiar with the river's pottery than with its gravel. On arriving at the Geological Museum for the verdict, I heard that although no staff member could say with certainty where my ballast sample originated, they were almost certain of one thing—it didn't come from the Thames. Thus the riddle of the Castle Harbour wreck and her Roman pottery has yet to be solved.

THE SAGA of Martin's Hundred and its far-flung research has been rich in surprises, not the least of them coming from a pit at the edge of our Wolstenholme Suburb: the bones of a left human leg, bent at the knee, lying on its side—apparently alone.

At once we recalled contemporary descriptions of the 1622 uprising, which told of the Indians "mangling the dead carcasses into many pieces, and carrying some parts away in derision, with base and brutish triumph." Could this be a relic of such dismemberment? If so, why was the trophy left behind?

We studied early European engravings of alleged Indian atrocities and noted that our

Bermuda connections for pipes and pots

Sea Venture

"NOT STRONGER than a nutshell" was the doomed vessel in The Tempest. The Sea Venture met a similar fate in 1609 and helped inspire Shakespeare's romantic play. Off Bermuda, the flagship of Sir George Somers struck a reef after a hurricane with a group of colonists en route to Jamestown, thus becoming one of the island's most famous wrecks.

Renewed excavations on the ship, discovered in 1958, have linked its cargo with similar goods brought by later settlers at Wolstenholme Towne.

Earthenware jars (left) made in Devonshire in the west of England were probably taken aboard when the vessel stopped at Plymouth. They are studied by Audrey Noel Hume, historian for the Virginia project, and Allan J. Wingood, director of the Sea Venture research on behalf of the Bermuda Maritime Museum.

The wreck's jars provided the earliest firm date of manufacture for similar pots (below) from Wolstenholme Towne.

Castle Harbour wreck

PERILOUS REEFS around Bermuda are an archaeologist's dream. More than 300 shipwrecks hold an unrivaled store of artifacts. When firmly linked to a vessel known to have sunk in a particular year, they can be used to closely date similar objects found elsewhere.

No one knows this vast undersea cross-referencing file better than veteran Bermuda diver Teddy Tucker (above left). He found this clay tobacco pipe along with many others in Castle Harbour in and around the hull of a ship that may be the Warwick, lost in 1619.

In size and shape Tucker's pipes match some of those (left) that turned up in a well within Wolstenholme Towne's fort. Initially, the Virginia investigators had been unable to date the fort's pipes as early as 1622, the year of the Indian attack and the town's presumed abandonment. But if Tucker's wreck is the Warwick, then such pipes were available to the settlers as early as 1619.
"Treachery and cruelty have done their worst to us," a colonist wrote of "that fatall Friday morning" of March 22, 1622. Smoke and ash billowed into the sky during simultaneous Indian attacks on more than a score of homesteads, including those of Martin's Hundred.

Driven by "the dayly feare ... that in time we ... would disposess the inhabitants of this Country," unarmed warriors had paid the colonists an ostensibly friendly visit. Seizing their hosts' own tools and weapons, the Indians struck, "so sodainly in their cruel execution, that few or none discerned the ... blow that brought them to destruction."

At Martin's Hundred, 78 deaths were reported. But about 20 of those people proved to have survived as hostages, and most of them were later released.

My initial reaction was that the unfortunate woman had been thrown into the pit; but while she still lay in the cold December ground, I caught the flu and retired to bed—where, twice in the space of a single feverish morning, I awoke to find myself lying in the same position. I became convinced that hers was a posture of repose, and that her hand was not clenched but naturally folded, as mine was while I slept.

A call to Dr. Marcella F. Fierro, deputy chief medical examiner of Virginia, brought welcome support. Our skeleton's position was consistent with death from exposure. In their last hours, Marcella explained, its victims often cease to feel cold; instead they drift first into a phase of relaxed contentment and thence into sleep.

We called our lady Granny because she had lost all her lower molars—though the tooth loss did not necessarily point to advanced age. In the opinion of Dr. Lawrence Angel, curator of physical anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution, Granny was between 35 and 45, a delicately boned woman about 5 feet 5 inches in height. Around her head was the ultimate surprise: an iron band with a pewter knob at one end and a twist at the other, the remains of a metal-cored fabric support over which Elizabethan women rolled their hair. It was a style popular between about 1590 and 1615. The band was twisted and bent back around the nape of her neck—as though roughly dragged away from her head.

What scenario could bring this matronly
"We called her Granny"

Thus nicknamed because she had lost all her lower molars, although probably about 40 years old, the woman had died a poignant death. Bit by bit, her remains (right) gave the archaeologists evidence of a cruel demise.

She lay in a trash pit outside the homestead at the Suburb, a site replete with clues such as other skeletons, ashes, and part of a burned post ringed by scorched clay. At first only Granny’s left leg was visible. Gently, the excavators probed deeper and finally uncovered the bones of a woman lying on her side, one arm to her head, the other across her chest, fingers folded. When the author became ill with a fever and awoke one morning in the same position, he reasoned that Granny might not have been thrown into the pit, as he first believed, but reached it under her own power and died in a sleeping position.

But the real telltale evidence was wrapped around her head: the remnant of a metal-cored fabric support for a hairstyle popular among Elizabethan women. A Flemish engraving made about 1610 (above left) shows one such hair roll, elaborately jeweled. Granny’s had a pewter knob at one end, and was away (bottom left). An X-ray of her skull (middle) shows the hair roll as a white line. The pewter knob, lower right, is in place below her right ear. The rest of the roll should be in an arc over the top of her head. Instead, it has been bent back—as if yanked by a scalp-seeking Indian (page 59).

Wounded, she may have crawled into the hole to hide, and drifted into an endless sleep.
lady to her sleeping death in a half-filled
trash pit?
I remembered the apparent scalping scar
on the first-found victim of the attack and
tentatively concluded that Granny, too, had
been deprived of a hair lock.
The burned remains of the house found at
the Suburb, and the hastily buried dead out-
side its compound, left little doubt that once
again we were in the midst of the massacre.
The documents tell us that the attack was
launched in the morning, in some instances
by Indians who may have lodged overnight
and who had sat down to breakfast with
their intended victims—but not so early as
to prevent Granny from doing her hair in the
elaborate style fashionable in England in her
youth. Clearly she was a lady who believed
in maintaining her standards, even on what
was to her the frontier of civilization.
When the disarmingly unarmed Indians
seized shovels from their hosts’ hearths and
brands from their fires, the men of Martin’s
Hundred may have already been at work in
their fields. Perhaps, we argued, only the
women were left in Wolstenholme’s palis-
daded Suburb: two, whose shallow graves
were found, were struck down and killed;
and Granny, who, left for dead, managed to
crawl away amid the smoke and confusion.
Escaping through a gate in the southwest
corner of the palisade, and intending to
make her way down the adjacent ravine to
the beach, she changed her mind (perhaps
because she heard Indians ahead of her on
the shore) and hid in the open pit waiting for
the looters to move on.
As dusk approached, Granny lay huddled
against the side of the hole, weak from loss of
blood, sheltering from a chill March wind,
hoping that someone had survived and
would come to save her. And there she
died—so far from her homeland and the
green fields and spires of Shakespeare’s
England, no one to pray for her soul or to lay
her to rest. Instead, the hostile land claimed
her; rainwater filled the pit; silt washed
from its sides, and fast-growing weeds and
grasses sprouted in the mud. Together they
concealed her even from scavenging ani-
mals. She had chosen a hiding place so
secure that it kept her safe for 357 years.
Finding three women and no separately
buried men in the vicinity of the compound
was in itself a surprise. Men, certainly,
had been there, for pieces of weapons and armor
were scattered through the pits. Recogniz-
ig relics of distaff life is always hard, for
even kitchen equipment would have been used
by men in the absence of women. At the
same time, many a Virginia housewife
would have taken a man’s sash to split her own
wood. Archaeologists therefore have diffi-
culty recognizing a lady.

I had identified a group of nine
small, rose-decorated metal buttons as
coming from a man’s doublet, but when I
sent drawings to a costume expert at Lon-
don’s Victoria and Albert Museum, back
came the suggestion that they had orna-
mented a woman’s dress. My thinking
turned to Granny in the Ground—Granny
who dressed her hair as would befit a lady
used to wearing a gown decorated with rose-
embroidered buttons. Was it not strange, I
thought, that around her skeleton we had
found not a single trace of clothing? Perhaps
the grouping of the buttons south of the
house was telling us where she was at-
tacked, and offering another reason why,
stripped and bleeding, she fled no farther
than the pit.
Everything fitted, until, like Aesop’s dog,
I was undone by greed. Seeking confirma-
tion that the buttons came from a woman’s
dress, I wrote to Jan Baart, city archaeolo-
gist for Amsterdam and an authority on
17th-century buttons. Back came a photo-
graph of an original garment fitted with
similar decorative buttons. But it wasn’t a
woman’s dress; it was a man’s doublet, and a
bricklayer’s doublet at that!
But how did Jan Baart know that it had
belonged to a bricklayer?
In 1619 the religious dissident and lawyer,
Huig de Groot, better known as Hugo Gro-
tius and the author of the concepts of free-
dom of the seas and international law, was
imprisoned in the fortress at Leeuwestein in
the Netherlands. In time his guards allowed
him to resume his writing, to which end
books were brought in and out of the prison
in a large wooden chest. On March 22, 1621,
the books stayed and Grotius went. On
reaching the home of a friend, he bor-
rrowed a bricklayer’s clothes and tools, and
thus disguised, he escaped to Antwerp.
Although Grotius had deftly unzipped my
Granny’s dress theory, his borrowed doub-
let provided an almost unbelievable piece of
documentation: It proved that buttons like
ours were in use in Europe just a year to the
day before the Indians struck at Martin’s
Hundred.
We stopped digging two years ago, but in
the laboratory treatment of the artifacts goes
on, and the discoveries being made there can
be as exciting as and unexpected as anything
revealed by the archaeologist’s trowel. Even
as this article was on its way to the press,
sharp-eyed conservator Hans Barlow dis-
covered Martin’s Hundred’s most explicit
message. Hidden in the fold of lead used to
mount glass in lattice windows was stamped
the inscription—JOHN BISHOPP OF EXETER
GONNER 1625—making the lead our earliest
dated artifact. The most likely reading is
“John Bishop of Exeter, Gonner, 1625,”
although the interpretation of the last word
is uncertain.
What did the message mean, and why
was it concealed within the folded lead
where no one would ever see it?

Q
UESIONS like these keep us con-
stantly on the alert. The names, the
cliches, the false leads, the missing
witnesses, the bones of mutilated victims are
all the stuff of detective fiction, but for us,
the archaeological sleuths of Martin’s Hun-
dred, the mysteries are real.
One would like to claim that all our
jigsaw-puzzle pieces have been fitted to-
gether through cleverness on our part. But it
just isn’t so. Chance has given us a wonder-
fully rich site, and luck has led us by the
hand every step of the way. Without it, and
incredibly hard work by dozens of excavators
and research specialists, Martin’s Hundred
would still be a forgotten name on a
damaged highway marker. Instead, Wol-
stenholme Towne is safely back on the map
and into the pages of American history.