

J. C. Harrington Medal in Historical Archaeology



WILLIAM M. KELSO 2007

Bill Kelso left his native Ohio in 1963, the year he completed an undergraduate degree in history at Baldwin-Wallace College, to enroll in a graduate program in early American history and culture at the College of William and Mary. He has, except for a brief stint in Georgia, lived and worked in Virginia ever since. Bill has said that reading a *National Geographic* article about the 1957 excavations at Jamestown on a cold March day in his college library inspired his path to Virginia where it might, he thought, be possible to blend his two passions, archaeology and early American history. Williamsburg was exactly the right place to combine those interests. Kelso wrote a master's thesis on shipbuilding in 18th-century Virginia, but he also met, and soon worked for, Ivor Noël Hume. Summer field seasons from 1964 to 1966, one of them excavating the site of Williamsburg's 18th-century Public Hospital, launched a career in historical archaeology that now spans five decades.

As a graduate student at William and Mary, Kelso visited Jamestown where he, like other visitors, was told that the site of the 1607 fort and subsequent settlement there had eroded into the James River. Something about that explanation did not ring true, and in 1993, with permission to explore an area almost precisely where J. C. Harrington had conducted some of the last archaeological work he pursued at Jamestown, Kelso found that James Fort and almost everything that colonists had built, burned, torn down, and thrown away was still there, buried just inches beneath commemorative statues to John Smith and Pocahontas. Kelso's work at Jamestown has continued for more than a dozen years. Those excavations will likely be his last, and they are likely to be the accomplishment for which he will best be remembered. Kelso's discovery of James Fort is, however, only the most recent of a string of notable achievements that have punctuated his career in historical archaeology since its start in the early 1960s. His successes and contributions to historical archaeology range from the bureaucratic, when he served as Virginia's first state archaeologist and established programs that continue to this day; to the methodological, when he pioneered many of the techniques of open area excavation that archaeologists working in the Chesapeake now take for granted; to the evangelical, when he inspired the establishment of permanent archaeological research programs at historic sites such as Mount Vernon and Monticello. Along the way, Kelso helped train a younger generation of archaeologists who have moved from his field crews to university and research programs of their own. Alumni of his projects and classes (through the School of Architecture at the University of Virginia and the Department of History at the College of William and Mary) all benefited from the collaborative approach he learned in the first years of his own career.

For several years after completing his master's degree, Bill taught history at James Blair High School in Williamsburg where he was also its successful football coach. The summer months were reserved for archaeology with Colonial Williamsburg. Not many years of part-time archaeology passed before he decided in 1967 to leave the classroom (and briefly, Virginia) to work as a staff archaeologist with the Georgia Historical Commission in Savannah, Georgia.

Among other projects, he explored an early-18th-century fortified house at Wormslow Plantation. His work in Georgia produced important glimpses of the settlement strategies employed in establishing the youngest of America's 13 British mainland colonies (*Captain Jones's Wormslow: A Historical, Archaeological, and Architectural Study of an Eighteenth-Century Plantation Site near Savannah, Georgia*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1979). Bill also had a chance to dust off an old set of skills—moonlighting as a place kicker for a semiprofessional football team. Bill's Georgia years gave him an opportunity to complete a PhD at Emory University.

Kelso returned to Virginia in 1970 to accept a position with Colonial Williamsburg as field director for what today would be called an archaeological resources assessment of Carter's Grove Plantation. There was little, at that time, in the way of technical manuals or research designs to guide how best to assess potential archaeological resources within a parcel that contained many hundreds of acres, and many of the techniques he employed foreshadowed the CRM repertoire that emerged in the following decades.

On the heels of this project, Kelso began a project on an adjacent plantation, Kingsmill, that would occupy him for much of the next decade and that would, among other important results, yield insights into the evolution of settlement patterns in Virginia from the early-17th to the early-19th centuries (*Kingsmill Plantation, 1619–1800: Archaeology of Country Life in Colonial Virginia*, Academic Press, New York, NY, 1984). Significant among the findings at Kingsmill were several dozen earthfast structures whose analysis provided much of the data woven into the seminal essay, of which Kelso was a coauthor with historian Cary Carson, archaeologist Gary Wheeler Stone, and architectural historian Dell Upton: "Impermanent Architecture in the Southern American Colonies" (*Winterthur Portfolio* 16 [1981]:135–196). Important for its interpretation of the emergence of a distinctive regional architecture in the early Chesapeake, the influence of this frequently cited essay has extended well beyond Virginia and Maryland. It challenged how historians and architectural historians describe the domestic architecture of early America and explain its origins and evolution.

Kelso's work at Kingsmill and Carter's Grove also provided an early opportunity for him to investigate broad issues in the recovery and interpretation of historical landscapes, a topic that he pursued aggressively during his tenure as director of archaeology at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello and Poplar Forest, Jefferson's retreat in Bedford County, Virginia. While at Monticello, Kelso organized a conference in 1986 that resulted in a collection of essays to which he contributed "Landscape Archaeology at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello," one of nearly a dozen essays through which he explored the meaning of landscapes, both formal and informal (*Earth Patterns: Essays in Landscape Archaeology*, William M. Kelso and Rachel Most, editors, University Press of Virginia Charlottesville, 1990; also "Landscape Archaeology and Garden History Research," in *Journal of Garden History*, John Dixon Hunt, editor, pp. 31–57, 1993; and "Landscape Archaeology: A Key to Virginia's Past," in *Eighteenth Century Life* 8(2):159–169, 1983). His 1997 book *Archaeology of Thomas Jefferson's Monticello: Artifacts of Everyday Life in the Plantation Community* (Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, Charlottesville, Virginia) provides access to the excavations that explored Mulberry Row, the complex of houses and gardens that housed the enslaved Africans who made Thomas Jefferson's elaborate lifestyle possible.

Kelso has focused the last dozen years on Jamestown where he has served as director of archaeology for the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA) *Jamestown Rediscovery* project. Since undertaking the excavation of the 1607 James Fort, he has reported the results of his work there through a series of technical reports and booklets published annually between 1995 and 2000 and summarized in *Jamestown Rediscovery 1994–2004* (APVA/Preservation Virginia, Richmond, 2004). *Jamestown, The Buried Truth* (University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 2006) supersedes these earlier publications. While it is early to weigh the significance of the research presented in these books, it is already clear that the work at Jamestown challenges long-standing notions about the character of life during the colony's first decades. Discussion of the implications of what has been discovered at Jamestown will stretch well into the future. An important part of that discussion will be further consideration

of the tension inherent in nearly everything that happened at Jamestown between "being English" and becoming something else—not yet "American" and not yet "Virginian" but, nevertheless, distinct. Kelso suggests that process is "American inventing itself."

Kelso's legacy in the archaeology of early Virginia will extend far beyond his work at Jamestown and will benefit his successors in numerous ways. During his tenure as commissioner of archaeology from 1971 until 1979 for the Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission, then Virginia's state historic preservation office, Bill actively pursued projects in which he could engage, directly or through the media, the broad public that he understood shared his enthusiasm for archaeology. Resulting popular interest, gained through exhibits, press coverage, and documentary films in the late 1970s and during his work at Monticello, established a pattern that Bill replicated at Jamestown with programs prepared for the History Channel, the Discovery Channel, National Geographic Explorer, as well as a number of PBS programs. All of them have raised public interest in Jamestown and in historical archaeology in general. This ability to address both popular audiences and specialists may, in time, turn out to be Bill's most important legacy. His deft touch with public audiences also led to constructive alliances with local and state political officials who led efforts to introduce zoning and permitting regulations that provided additional protection for archaeological resources. Certainly, Virginia is for historical archaeology far more hospitable and supportive than it was before Bill began to lobby for the administrative and research programs that continue to energize archaeological research in the Commonwealth. The public with whom he worked also included developers, a constituency whose members emerged, surprisingly, in some portions of Virginia as partners in some of the most important archaeological projects undertaken in the last quarter of the 20th century.

Bill's accomplishments have already earned wide acclaim. Baldwin-Wallace College awarded him an honorary doctorate in 2002, the year he delivered the commencement address for his undergraduate alma mater and was named a distinguished alumnus by Emory University. The Virginia Press Association named him "Virginian of the Year" in 2005, an honor that

followed his election as Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.

Kelso's professional reputation, as understood through his publications, occupies a significant place in historical archaeology. His publications are widely cited and often assigned in both undergraduate and graduate courses. He is among that very small band of historical archaeologists whose research David Hurst Thomas and other chroniclers of the history of archaeology have deemed important enough to weave into their histories of our craft. Kelso's essays and books have been, and will continue to be, essential to the continuing dialogues about the recovery and interpretation of historical landscapes, about the antecedents and evolution of domestic architecture in early America, about the architecture and material culture of plantation slavery, and, of course, about Jamestown and the beginnings of English settlement of North America.

In his free time, Bill plays guitar and banjo with bluegrass bands styled "Ever Who Shows Up" and "Gas Money," distinctive for their floating composition of musician friends from the Williamsburg area. He has long been a dedicated runner, remains an avid football fan, and fishes more now that he resides on Jamestown Island. Bill restored a 19th-century mill when he worked at Monticello and is now restoring a 19th-century cabin near Charlottesville. His wife, Ellen, a retired teacher who plays bass for the bands, is the self-proclaimed "mayor of

Jamestown (population 2). She and Bill, who share the small cottage with their two basset hounds, have two children, Libbie and Marty, as well as four grandchildren. "Godspeed Cottage" (named after one of the ships, *Godspeed*, that delivered some of Jamestown's first colonists) is a stone's throw from the recently excavated west wall of James Fort.

Kelso's discovery and subsequent excavation of the fort and the structures that crowded early-17th-century Jamestown are sufficient to secure him a place of honor in the history of historical archaeology in North America. It is, however, the scope of his long career as well as the breadth of his scholarly writing for which he so well deserves the Harrington Award. Thanks to the extensive laboratories and financial support systems Kelso has built at Jamestown, analytical studies of the data retrieved thus far will continue well into the future. As they do, it will, one suspects, become more and more clear that Bill owes much to Pinkie and the work he conducted at Jamestown more than half a century ago. Bill, more than any of us, works daily in Harrington's professional and intellectual shadow and nothing, one guesses, will honor William Kelso and his accomplishments more than being named 2007 recipient of The Society for Historical Archaeology's J. C. Harrington Award.

CARTER L. HUDGINS