

Birds of Power in the Ancient Southwest

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A view of Duke of Gloucester Street in Williamsburg, Virginia, showing rebuilt colonial-era shops and houses. During a century of investigations into the city's past, archaeologists and historians have discovered building foundations and architectural details that have enabled these reconstructions. They have also unearthed more than 60 million artifacts.



LETTER FROM WILLIAMSBURG

A NEW LOOK AT AN OLD CITY

Archaeologists are reconstructing the complicated 400-year history of Virginia's colonial capital

By ANDREW LAWLER

A torrential spring downpour had left a sea of mud at a construction site in the old Virginia capital of Williamsburg, but archaeologist Jack Gary seemed oblivious to the muck as he held out a small silver disk. That morning in 2024, his team had discovered the worn Spanish half real in the cellar of a demolished colonial-era manor house. The coin had been minted, Gary explained, in Lima, Peru, 3,500 miles to the south. The team had also

unearthed a fragment of a delicate Chinese teacup, an African cowrie shell, and pieces of an English-made leaded glass window. "We now have finds from four continents," says Gary. "This shows how connected the residents were with the wider world." After analyzing bricks from the house's cellar, Gary, director of archaeology at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, has concluded that the structure is likely a rare example of a prestigious home built before the

town became Virginia's capital in 1699. The rich array of objects left behind when the house was torn down in the late 1730s is evidence that a prosperous family once lived there. The tiny cowrie shell, however, reveals the other side of that genteel affluence: In colonial Virginia, prosperity was built on the backs of enslaved laborers brought from West Africa to work the tobacco fields.

Gary and his team were rushing to recover what they could before work