

New research reveals that America's oldest tombstone came from Belgium and belonged to an English knight

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Jamestown Knight's tombstone. Credit: Jamestown Rediscovery (Preservation Virginia) in *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* (2024). DOI: 10.1007/s10761-024-00756-4

Jamestown, Virginia, was founded in 1607 and was the first English permanent settlement in America. It has been the subject of many archaeological and historical analyses, including a recent study by Prof. Markus M. Key and Rebecca K. Rossi, which set out to determine the provenance of Jamestown's black "marble" knight's tombstone. What they determined was unexpected, says Prof. Key.

"For the past decade, I have been interested in determining the provenance of lithic artifacts using fossils contained within them. While working on the following project, determining the provenance of colonial black 'marble' tombstones from the Chesapeake Bay region, U.S.

"We found that the oldest tombstone was the knight's tombstone in Jamestown from 1627. The particular historical archaeological question we were trying to answer was: How extensive was the trade network in the Chesapeake Bay during colonial times?

"Little did we realize that colonists were ordering black marble tombstones from Belgium like we order items from Amazon, just a lot slower."

During the 17th century, affluent English colonists often memorialized themselves and their wealth with impressive tombstones. In the Chesapeake Bay region, these were often black "marble" tombstones. The Jamestown knight's tombstone was one such example.

Placed in the Jamestown Church in 1627, it remained in situ until it was relocated in the 1640s due to construction at the southern entrance. In 1907, the broken tombstone was rediscovered, repaired and placed in the present-day Memorial Church chancel.

Despite its name, the tombstone was not made of marble but rather of

black limestone. In [historical documents](#), any stone capable of being polished was often referred to as "marble."

The tombstone had carved depressions, indicating it had once held brass inlays. These were likely destroyed during Bacon's Rebellion in 1676. The inlays included a shield, which may have depicted a family crest, an unfurled scroll, and an armored man standing upon a pedestal, which may have once featured inscriptions.

To the right and left of the man's body were protrusions that may have indicated a sword hilt and shield, respectively. This led to the interpretation that the tombstone belonged to a knight.

Only two knights died in Jamestown during the life of the second Jamestown church (1617–1637). One was Sir Thomas West, the first resident governor of the colony. He died in 1618 during a transatlantic voyage to Jamestown. No historical or [archaeological evidence](#) could link the tombstone to Sir Thomas West.

The second knight was Sir George Yeardley. His step-grandson, Adam Thorowgood II, made a request for his own black "marble" tombstone in the 1680s, asking that it be engraved with the crest of Sir George Yeardley and the same inscription as the one on the "broken tomb." This indicated that the knight's tombstone was already broken in the 17th century, prior to its discovery in 1901.

If the tombstone was indeed Yeardley's, as the familial evidence suggests, this would make it the oldest surviving tombstone in North America. Sadly, no DNA testing could be undertaken to confirm if the bones at the original tombstone site had belonged to Yeardley,

"The part of the Jamestown Church where the knight's tomb was found has already been completely excavated by archaeologists. Unfortunately,

no bones with recoverable DNA were preserved to independently test for the connection to Sir George Yeardley."

George Yeardley was born in 1588 in Southwark, England. He first came to Jamestown in 1610 after initially being shipwrecked on Bermuda. He served as captain of Lt. Governor Sir Thomas Gates's guard and later as Lt. Governor of Virginia. He returned to England in 1617, a year after which he was appointed governor of Virginia and knighted by King James I.

He returned to Jamestown and remained in his position until 1621, until a few years later, he returned to England, only to be reappointed as Lord Governor in 1626. He returned to Jamestown once more and died the following year in 1627.

For his grave, a tombstone was commissioned, but where it had come from remained a mystery. According to Prof. Key, "A 'tombstone' is a dimension stone cut (and typically engraved) for use to mark a burial site.

"Native Americans undoubtedly had earlier grave markers (perhaps made of wood that did not survive), but they were not made of carved stone. Nor did the English settlers have the technology and skills to cut and engrave tombstones; that is why they imported them."

Furthermore, Prof. Key says, "The main cost of dimension stone is typically transportation costs as the stone itself is relatively low cost, and they weigh a lot. Therefore, most dimension stone is sourced locally. Thus, one would expect the source of the knight's tombstone to be local (our first hypothesis).

"Unfortunately, Jamestown is on the coastal plain physiographic province, which lacks rocks. Therefore, the stone had to be transported

to Jamestown."

To determine the provenance of the tombstone, researchers studied and identified the enclosed fossils within it. Prof. Key elaborates on why this method was chosen, "Due to the evolutionary process, biological species are much more unique through time and space than chemical elements or isotopic ratios."

The results, based on the microfossils identified (*Omphalotis minima* and *Paraarchaediscus angulatus*, and *P. concavus*), indicated that the tombstone had to have come from either Ireland or Belgium, as none of these species were ever found in North America.

Historical evidence suggests Belgium is the likely source, as Belgium has been the most common source of the Lower Carboniferous "black" marble for centuries, from Roman times through to the present. It was particularly popular among the wealthy in England during Yeardley's life.

He and other Virginian colonists would have been very aware of the latest fashions in England and would likely try to replicate them in the colonies.

The research, [published](#) in the *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, provides new insights into the extent of trade networks at Chesapeake Bay during [colonial times](#) and into the lengths some colonists went to in order to obtain goods and materials not available to them in their new homes.

More information: M. M. Key et al, Sourcing the Early Colonial Knight's Black "Marble" Tombstone at Jamestown, Virginia, USA, *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s10761-024-00756-4](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10761-024-00756-4)

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