

## St. Luke's Church (Newport Parish) Notes for Consideration in Dating the Construction of the Extant Building

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A series of recent projects conducted by *Archaeological & Cultural Solutions, Inc. (ACS)* at St. Luke's Church (Old Brick Church) have revealed new information on the dating of the extant brick church building. These sources provide fresh perspectives for looking at the origins of Virginia's oldest surviving church, especially in view of the revised dating of the church that has been revisited in recent years. Among the more detailed studies, Dell Upton and William Carrell<sup>1</sup> both suggest that the present building likely dates to the third or fourth quarter of the seventeenth century, rather than 1632, the date traditionally given because of vestry book recollection,<sup>2</sup> and because it was found inscribed on three bricks reportedly found during repairs following an 1887 storm.

In January, 2007, the remains of Joseph Bridger (d. 1686) were exhumed by *Archaeological & Cultural Solutions, Inc. (ACS)*, Williamsburg, Virginia, and the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., from the chancel of the church.<sup>3</sup> Bridger was moved from his original 1686 interment at Whitemarsh, his nearby plantation, and re-interred in the chancel in 1894. This project was requested by the Bridger Family Association in 2006 to allow the scientific study of the remains for inclusion in the Smithsonian Institution Museum of Natural History's "*Written in Bone: Forensic Files of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Chesapeake*," an exhibit that opened in February, 2009.<sup>4</sup>

Analysis of Col. Bridger's remains revealed that he had a severe case of the "dry-gripes," or lead poisoning. This condition was incurable and caused symptoms such as abdominal pain, reduced cognitive abilities, vomiting, weight loss, lethargy, kidney problems, and anemia. As well, his bones were found to contain arsenic, which probably compounded his physical problems.<sup>5</sup> It is plausible that his suffering caused him to execute his will

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<sup>1</sup> Dell Upton, *Holy Things and Profane—Anglican Parish Churches in Colonial Virginia*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997) and William P. Carrell II, *The Landed and Personal Estate of Gen. Joseph Bridger*, (Louisville: Kentucky, revised ed. 2006)

<sup>2</sup> see <http://www.historicstlukes.org/history.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Beginning in February 2007, and continuing intermittently to the present day, a remote sensing search, by the Smithsonian Institution and the Wheatland Foundation, Inc. for the 80% of the bones missing from Joseph Bridger's grave and for evidence of his home has been underway at Whitemarsh, his nearby plantation. Alain C. Outlaw, *The Search for Joseph Bridger: An Interim Report*, (2009), report on file with the Wheatland Foundation, Inc., Williamsburg, Virginia.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://anthropology.si.edu/writteninbone>.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas Owsley and Karin Bruwelheide, *Written in Bone: Bone Biographer's Casebook*. (Minneapolis: LeanTo Press, 2009) and <http://anthropology.si.edu/writteninbone/pewter.html>.

several years before his death in 1686, and that it possibly bore significance on the construction of the substantial brick church now known as St. Luke's. As the wealthiest individual of his time in Isle of Wight County, and the grandson of a prominent Anglican rector, did he choose to give to God's cause and to create an enduring legacy for himself by contributing the substantial sums necessary for the construction of an imposing brick edifice?

In July 2007, emergency archaeological investigations were required before the construction of a drainage system off the northwest corner of the church tower in conjunction with The Garden Club of Virginia improvements to the churchyard.<sup>6</sup> This project uncovered eight burials as well as associated artifacts, and led to a related study of the St. Luke's artifact collection assembled by the Jordan sisters during the 1955 interior restoration of the church. Among the bits and pieces of debris collected by the ladies were fragments of turned lead, often mistakenly referred to as "came." These strips held the small glass windowpanes in the casement windows that originally lighted the building. Initials and dates were sometimes engraved in glazier's vices, and, indeed, one of the turned lead fragments was found to bear the date 1685.<sup>7</sup> This dated artifact provides a significant clue to the age of the structure (figure 1), as its presence indicates that expensive casement windows were installed on or shortly after that date.

In addition, a cursory examination by ACS staff of one of the three bricks dated 1632, and reportedly found during repair work in 1887, revealed puzzling details. First, they are different in size and character than the bricks that form the fabric of the church. Second, the "1632" inscription is written differently than numerals inscribed during the era, for example, those on Bridger's ledger stone in the church's chancel. Studies of seventeenth century handwriting show that ones were "curvilinear"; sixes were "open"; and twos were "loopless" (figures 1 and 2).<sup>8</sup> Finally, recent investigations at the brick cellar foundation built by Bridger at Whitemarsh revealed that, in general, their size is identical to the bricks used to build the church (9" x 4" x 2.5").<sup>9</sup>

Other evidence also points to a 1680s period of construction for St. Luke's Church. Michael Fulgham's 1683 deed of one acre of land on which the church stood to the vestry of

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<sup>6</sup> Alain C. Outlaw, Timothy E. Morgan, and Mary Clemons with contributions from Doug Owsley, Karin Bruwelhiede, and Amanda Camp, *Archaeological Mitigation for a Drainage Trench at St. Luke's Church, Isle of Wight County, Virginia*, (2008), report on file with Historic St. Luke's Church, Isle of Wight County, Virginia.

<sup>7</sup> Alain C. Outlaw, 2008, *A Review of the Jordan Sisters Collection, Historic St. Luke's Church, Isle of Wight County, Virginia*, (2008), report on file with Historic St. Luke's Church, Isle of Wight County, Virginia.

<sup>8</sup> Kent P. Bailey and Ransom B. True, *A Guide to Seventeenth-Century Virginia Court Handwriting*. Research Bulletin 1: The Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, (1980).

<sup>9</sup> Alain C. Outlaw, *The Search for Joseph Bridger: An Interim Report*, (2009).

the Lower Parish of Isle of Wight County provided a site.<sup>10</sup> According to legend, Colonel Bridger brought Charles and Thomas Driver from England to “complete” the construction of the third floor of the church tower, and indeed, their initials are visible on bricks there.<sup>11</sup> Also, the church compares in basic plan and size to other brick examples at Jamestown and Middle Plantation (now Williamsburg), both with revised dating to the latter part of the seventeenth century (figure 3). Replacing earlier churches, the brick church at Jamestown is dated to c. 1680, while the Second Bruton Parish Church at Middle Plantation, nearly identical in size to St. Luke’s, is known to have been built 1681-1683.<sup>12</sup>

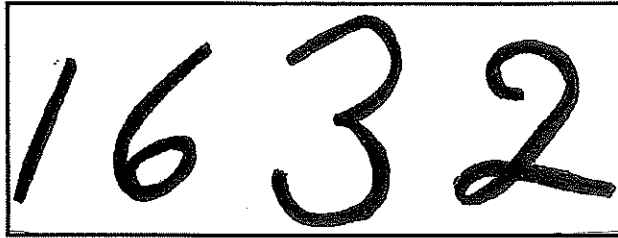
The upcoming results of dendrochronology on the few, rare surviving wooden parts of St. Luke’s should provide additional insights on the age of the extant building. Future studies should produce more conclusive evidence, as well. For example, although probably compromised by various restorations at the church, archaeological excavation of the builder’s trench may provide *in situ* datable artifacts. Also, a thorough scientific investigation of the sizes and the fabrics of the bricks, as well as their 1632 inscriptions, should provide evidence as to their origin. Additionally, close examination of the brickwork and mortar joints on the walls of the church and tower could reveal insights on the duration and/or episodes of the original construction of the edifice. Meanwhile, the possibility that Colonel Joseph Bridger was responsible for the entire construction of a substantial brick church at the end of his life is compelling. This would certainly be in character with his many other accomplishments.

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<sup>10</sup> Helen Haverty King, *Historical Notes on Isle of Wight County, Virginia*, (Smithfield, Virginia: Isle of Wight County Board of Supervisors, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> King, p. 303; Carrell, p. 93.

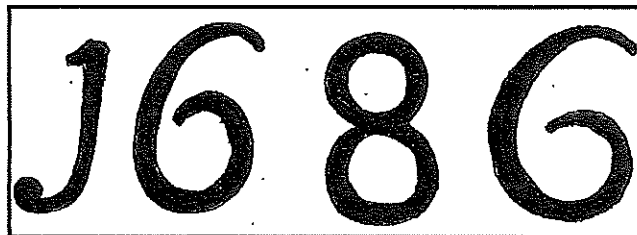
<sup>12</sup> Upton, p. 62.

A rectangular box containing a handwritten sketch of the date "1632". The numbers are written in a cursive, slightly irregular style. The "1" is a simple vertical stroke, the "6" has a small loop at the bottom, the "3" is a simple curve, and the "2" has a small loop at the top.

Sketch of 1632 date on one of the bricks, first reported after 1887 storm damage repairs.

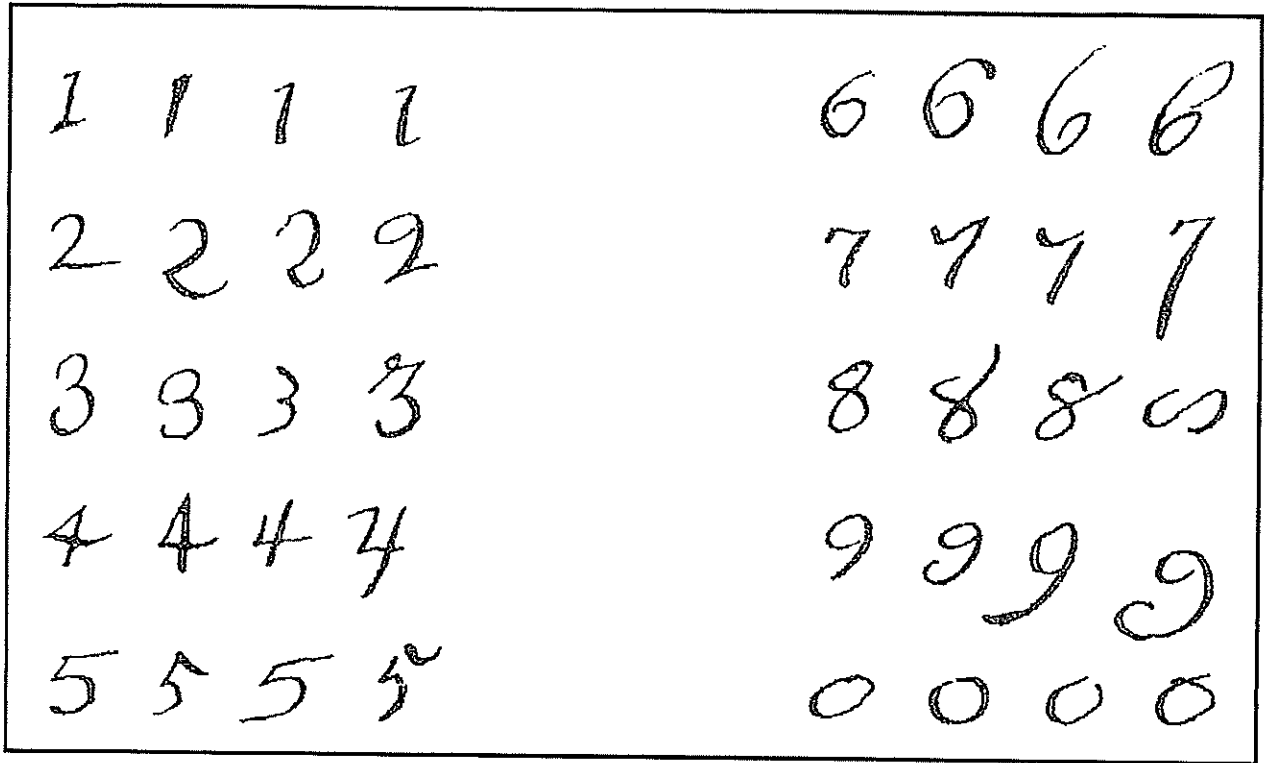
A rectangular box containing a handwritten sketch of the date "1685". The numbers are written in a cursive, slightly irregular style. The "1" is a simple vertical stroke, the "6" has a small loop at the bottom, the "8" is a simple curve, and the "5" has a small loop at the top.

Sketch of 1685 date on turned lead fragment, found in 1955, and identified in 2008.

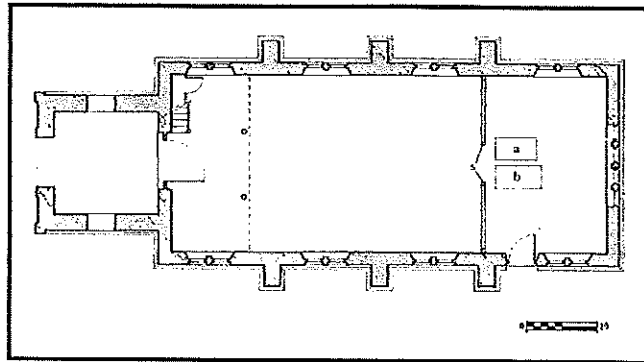
A rectangular box containing a handwritten sketch of the date "1686". The numbers are written in a cursive, slightly irregular style. The "1" is a simple vertical stroke, the "6" has a small loop at the bottom, the "8" is a simple curve, and the "6" has a small loop at the top.

Sketch of 1686 date on the Joseph Bridger stone ledger that was moved inside the Church in 1894.

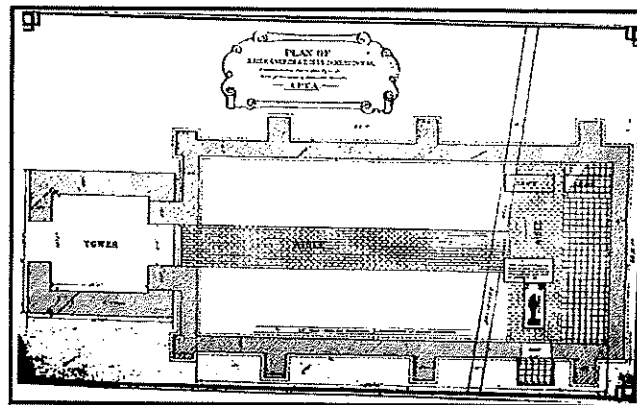
*Figure 1. Dates Found on Items within Historic St. Luke's Church (not to scale)*



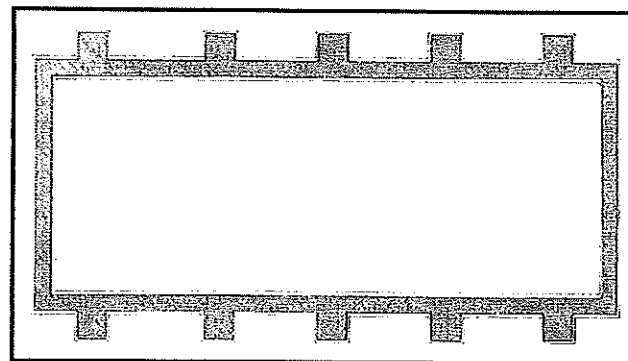
*Figure 2. Variations of Seventeenth Century Numerals*



St. Luke's Church  
Isle of Wight County



James City Parish  
Jamestown  
(c. 1680; tower c. 1699)



Second Bruton Parish Church  
Middle Plantation (now Williamsburg)  
(1681-83)

Figure 3. Seventeenth Century Virginia Brick Churches