A Note to the Reader

Years ago, when I was in college, I studied archaeology, a branch of science that helps us learn about people of the past. My work included an excavation—what archaeologists call a dig—in which my classmates and I uncovered evidence of the lives of people who had lived several thousand years earlier. The only remaining traces of their civilization were darkened circles of soil, fire-cracked rock surrounded by charcoal, and stone artifacts: spearpoints, knives, and a pestle for grinding corn. I wondered: *Who were these people? How had they lived?*

Much more recently, while touring an eighteenth-century plantation in South Carolina, I saw a sign that directed visitors toward a cemetery where slaves had been buried. An overgrown path, obviously seldom used, led into the woods. I decided to visit the cemetery and pay my respects to the people who had built and worked on the plantation.

I soon reached a clearing scattered with saplings and shrubs. A small wooden sign noted that in keeping with African tradition, the graves were not marked. I looked around, wondering where they might be. Then I remembered that an archaeologist had once given me a hint that could answer my question. During the eighteenth century, people were usually buried in wooden coffins. Over time, as the wood weakens, the weight of the soil on the coffin's lid may cause it to collapse. The soil sinks, leaving a depression on the surface of the ground.

Looking at the ground more carefully, I noticed slivers of shadows, visible only when the sun's rays caught the edges of very slight indentations in the soil surface. And suddenly I could see a pattern of graves, side by side, one after another, reminders of the people who had lived and worked on the land around me. *Who were they, and what were their lives like?*

Those questions stayed with me, just as the questions of my college years had. Then Dr. Douglas Owsley (*pictured, facing page*), a scientist at the Smithsonian Institution, asked me if I would be interested in writing a book about colonial settlers who had lived during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Virginia and Maryland. This area, called the Chesapeake because it surrounds the Chesapeake Bay, includes the settlement of Jamestown as well as many other settlements. I immediately agreed to write the book. The prospect was particularly exciting because I knew that Dr. Owsley learns about the people of the past in an unusual way:

he studies their skeletons. His specialty, forensic anthropology, has revealed details about the past that we might otherwise never have learned.

Graves are discovered every day. Some, like those found during archaeological excavations, may be expected. Others are completely unexpected. These graves—unmarked and long forgotten—are uncovered as land is used for new purposes, such as the construction of buildings and roads. Sometimes bones are exposed as water and wind erode soil from the land. Regardless of the manner in which a grave is uncovered, ethical scientists will open it and remove the contents only for a legitimate reason. Archaeologists follow certain procedures required by federal, state, and local laws. If a burial is in a known cemetery, the permission of a church or other religious authority may also be needed. In all cases, human remains must be handled in a manner that respects the dead as well as the customs of the living.

As part of my research for this book, I joined Dr. Owsley and his crew on a dig in Talbot County, Maryland (*right*). There we excavated the unmarked graves of twelve colonial settlers, buried nearly three hundred years ago. The remains we found included adults, a teenager, and infants.

Excavating a human skeleton is an affecting experience that can provoke many emotions. At first I worried that I might accidentally damage or break one of the bones with the edge of the trowel I was using to remove soil. Then I worried about my reaction to seeing the bones. Would they still have flesh on them? (Dr. Owsley explained that the soil conditions in the area made that highly unlikely.) Would I feel frightened? Might my stomach feel queasy?

When the first glimpses of bones appeared, my worries vanished. They were replaced with a sense of awe as I realized I was touching more than bones. I was touching a real person who had lived and then died several hundred years ago. An intense desire filled me, a desire to learn all I could about this individual's life and death and to treat these remains with respect.

One of the graves I helped to excavate contained the remains of an infant who had lived only five or six months. As the mother of two children, I felt sad when I saw the tiny bones. I thought of the baby's mother, possibly the last person to touch the child, and I sensed a connection with her that reached across hundreds of years. In a small way, our lives touched. Once again, I wondered: *Who were these people? What were their lives like?*

As I continued my research for this book, I asked the same questions about the first human inhabitants of the Chesapeake–Native Americans such as the Powhatan, who lived on land that later became part of Virginia, and the Yaocomaco, who made their home in the future colony of Maryland. I learned that the study of Indian remains is a subject of great controversy. For cultural and spiritual reasons, some people of Native American descent object to the removal of their ancestors' remains from burial sites for scientific study. In the United States, when scientists find remains that they determine to be Indian, the law generally requires that excavation, testing, and analysis stop. Native American officials must be contacted. They decide what will be done with the remains.

This book tells the story of past peoples through the analysis of their bones and graves. In recognition of the perspective of some Native Americans on this type of study, I've chosen to refrain from including photographs of Indian remains or graves. *Written in Bone* is therefore limited to the study of colonial burials. This choice is meant not to diminish the importance of Native Americans in the history of the Chesapeake region, but rather to respect the desire of their descendants to see their remains treated in a manner that respects their cultural customs.

Our investigations begin with a discovery dating to the early 1600s in Jamestown, Virginia. From there, we'll witness the excavation of graves that span more than a century of colonial history. We'll see how archaeologists, forensic anthropologists, and other scientists work together to answer questions like those I've continually found myself asking. Along with these explorers of the past, we'll visit lost settlements and hear untold stories, some of which are written only in bone.

—Sally M. Walker