

## GLASS BEADS FROM THE SUFFOLK SITE

Ben C. McCary

The Spring-Summer 1935 issue of Stained Glass, Vol. XXX, published an article entitled, "Discovery of Old Glass Bead Works in Virginia." The first paragraph makes the following statement: "Walter J. Sparks has brought to light evidence that bead making in Virginia did not end with the Italian craftsmen near Jamestown in 1621, but continued through many years of the Colonial period. Thus Virginia must be recognized as one of the few places in the world where beads were made during the seventeenth and on into the eighteenth century."

On August 11, 1935, there appeared in the Virginia Pilot an article entitled, "Site of old Glass Furnace is found on the Johnson Farm." Several passages from the article read as follows: "That one of the earliest industries of the Virginia colonists was glass making of a high order, is a belief that has had substantial proof recently when Walter J. Sparks of Richmond found on the Johnson farm what he believes to have been the site of an ancient glass works... Glass beads, broken pieces of glass ware, and fragments of window glass have been found on the farm and what is thought to be the remains of an ancient glass furnace... The records of Suffolk and its vicinity were all destroyed by fire many years ago; therefore it is impossible to find in the clerk's office of either city or county, any records of an early glass factory or furnace... It is believed that the beads found on the Johnson farm must have been imperfect specimens, and that the perfect ones were kept for sale or for Indian trade," etc.

There were two ventures in glassmaking at Jamestown. The first venture began in the fall of 1608, and came to a close perhaps in the fall of 1609. It was apparently not interested in beads, and all that can be said is that it may have produced a few simple glass objects.

The second venture was organized in 1621 by Captain William Norton. It was undertaken for the express purpose of "making all manner of Beads and Glasses." Norton and his six Italian glassmakers arrived at Jamestown in the fall of 1621. From that time until the spring of 1624, intermittent efforts were made to set up a glasshouse and make glass. The Indian massacre of 1622, Norton's death, sickness, and the lack of cooperation on the part of the glassmakers, "suggest that little, if any glass was made during this second glass-making venture at Jamestown" (Harrington, 1952, pp. 6-10, 32). Furthermore, evidence seems to indicate that the first and second venture took place at the same site -- the

site uncovered by Harrington in 1948 -- yet not one bead nor a single fragment of a bead tube came to light when the site was uncovered. If beads in any quantity had been fabricated there, one would expect that a few would have been dropped and lost.

Harrington's work at the glasshouse site will help to put an end to the tendency in the past to label almost every glass bead found in Virginia as a Jamestown bead. An example of this tendency is found in the Leedstown's cache. In the spring of 1925, a large cache of beads of at least 13 varieties was plowed up near Leedstown, Virginia. Collectors bought many of them and they were soon widely scattered. Some years later Bushnell published an account of the discovery and expressed the doubt that any of the beads were made at Jamestown (Bushnell, 1937, pp. 30-35). Nevertheless, when I find some of those beads in collections today, the owners almost invariably insist that they were made at Jamestown. When they are told that serious students of the subject believe that the Leedstown beads fall into the category of the late 17th and on into the 18th century beads, their faces still express disbelief. An opinion that they have held for twenty-five or thirty years cannot be changed overnight.

Sparks' deductions that there was a glasshouse on the Johnson farm at Suffolk and that beads were made there are wrong, and this becomes very apparent after all the facts are considered. Mr. J. E. Byrd of Suffolk, Virginia, called my attention to the articles quoted above, and also obtained permission for me to visit the bead site. Byrd also informed me that some local people who had collected beads from the site believed, as Sparks did, that the beads were made on the site and that they were used in trade with the Indians. Byrd and I visited the site as often as possible last spring, summer, and fall. On several occasions, after very hard rains, the land was in ideal condition.

The area of the site proper covers approximately two-thirds of an average city block, but it seems to take on much larger proportions when you are crawling around on your hands and knees looking for objects as small as beads. By dint of this hard but fascinating labor, several hundred beads of various sizes and colors were recovered. A significant number of small broken pieces of pottery, bottle glass, gunflints, and a few fragments of thin window glass were found in association with the beads. But from the

very beginning we noticed that many of these artifacts showed much evidence of fire. Beads of different colors and sizes fused together, pieces of molten glass, and fire damaged gunflints and pottery clearly revealed that all these articles had been in a home, a small warehouse or a store which was destroyed by fire. No slag, "frit," fragments of melting pots, or drippings came to light. In short, nothing was recovered which would indicate that a glasshouse had ever stood on the site.

The glass beads and the broken pottery vessels also tell their story to the experts who have examined them. Paul Hudson of the National Park Service, Jamestown, Virginia, examined the pottery fragments found in association with the beads, and all those which can be dated belong to the early part of the 19th century. Kenneth E. Kidd, Curator, The Royal Ontario Museum of Archaeology, Toronto, Canada, Arthur Woodward, former Director of History and Anthropology, Los Angeles County Museum, California, and Glenn A. Black, Angel Mounds, Newburgh, Indiana, examined specimens of the various types of the Suffolk beads, and although their time estimates vary, they fall roughly in the period from 1790 to 1850. Black preferred a date closer to 1850 than to 1790. Here are some of the observations made relative to these beads: The small blue "seed beads" (Fig. 1, No. 11) are an interesting type. They could belong to early contact period, but since that time they have been very common and can be easily duplicated in the trading stores of today. Therefore, they provide no help in dating. The majority of the Suffolk beads are faceted, and faceting was apparently unknown in the 17th century, but very popular toward the end of the 18th century and throughout the 19th. The clear faceted beads (Fig. 1, No. 2) were termed "cut beads" by the trade and were in great demand around the middle of the 19th century. Clear glass beads (unfaceted of course) were not at all popular in the 17th century. The colors of these beads are not those of the 17th century, being mostly solid and too brilliant. Even their styles help to date them, being for the most part of the styles sold during the first half of the 19th century. During the 1850s and the 1860s, the white women used the clear faceted and the colored faceted beads of the Suffolk types for making all sorts of odd ornaments including small hot pads and fringes for various bits of household finery.

It seems, therefore, that we have all the evidence we need to state that there was not a glass factory on the Suffolk site; that the beads found there belong

to a period approximately from 1790 to 1850; and that they belong to a period which was too late for them to be used for the Indian trade in Virginia. However, the fact that these beads do not belong to an early period does not detract completely from their interest and historical value. They are indeed important to the extent that they represent some of the types which were popular with the white women of the latter part of the 18th century and of the first half of the 19th.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Harrington, J. C., Glassmaking at Jamestown, Richmond, 1952.

Bushnell, David I. Jr., Indian Sites below the Falls of the Rappahannock, Virginia, Vol. 96, No. 4., Washington, D. C. 1937.

#### NOTES ON FIGURE 1

String of beads No. 1 belong to Dr. W. L. L. Smoot of Millers Tavern, Virginia. They were obtained a few years ago from an old Negro woman who lived at Indian Neck in King and Queen County. She died recently and was believed to be 90-odd years of age. Some of the beads in this string have the same shape and color as many of the beads from the Suffolk site, and apparently belong to the same period. Arrows point to some of the beads which are similar.

All the other beads shown are from the Suffolk site. No. 2 shows faceted beads of clear glass. No. 3. Beads with a center of white glass with an overlay of clear glass. No. 4. Beads of green glass covered with a slip of red. No. 5. Beads of various sizes, shapes, and colors. There are some blue, amber, green, deep red in transmitted light, and opaque black beads on this string. No. 6. Very pretty purple beads. No. 7. One bead on this string is shaped like a button. An interesting type is the second bead from the end on the left. Its surface is covered with five small ridges. No. 8. Opaque black beads, not faceted. No. 9. Two small red seed beads on the end of the string to the left. The remaining beads are opaque black, and their surface is covered with small ridges. No. 10. Small beads of various colors, blue, amber, black, white, and red. No. 11. Small blue "seed beads." No. 12. Small white beads made of two layers of white opaque glass. No. 13. Blue beads with a core of white glass and an overlay of blue glass.

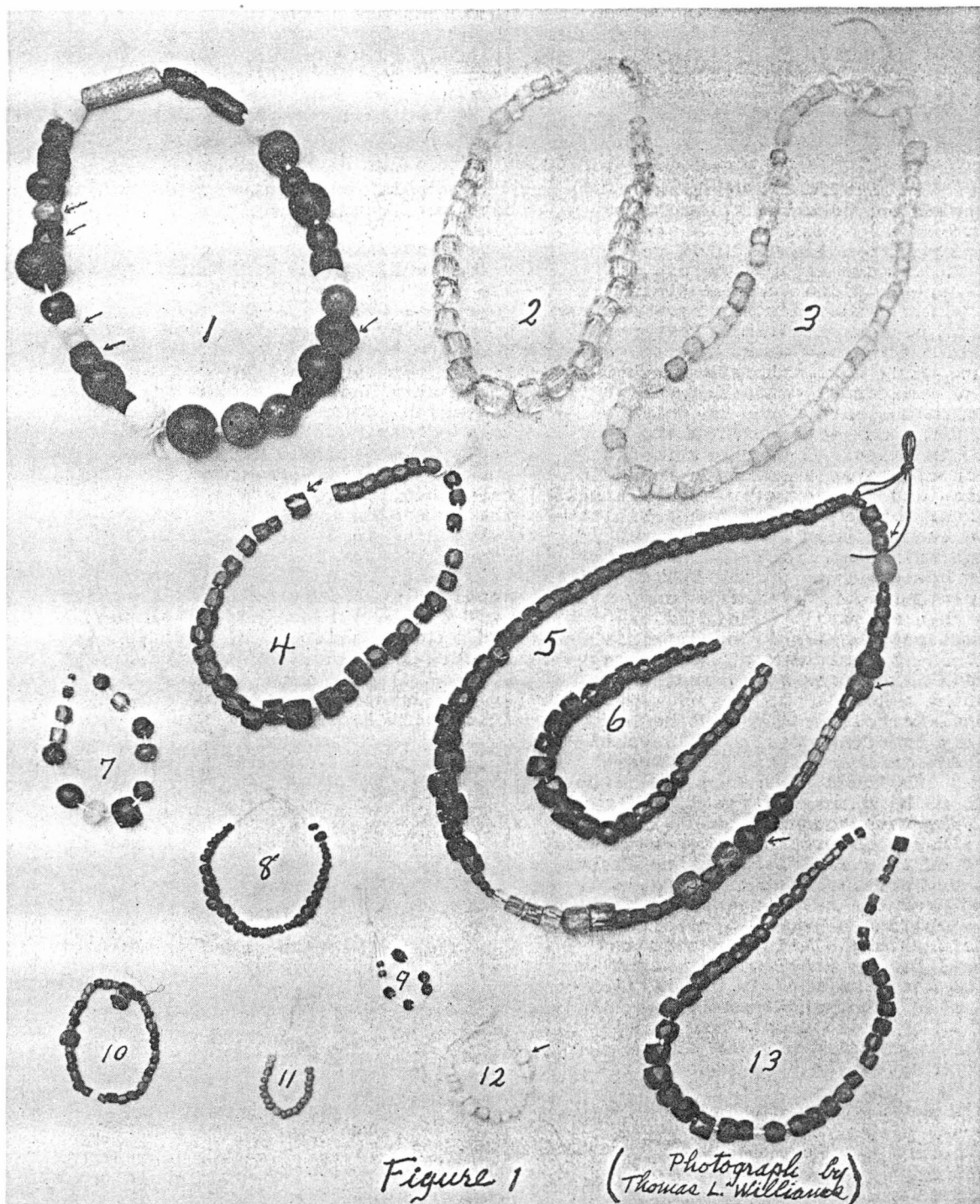


Figure 1

Photograph by  
Thomas L. Williams