Archaeologist Bill Kelso suffered from three nagging fears when - defying the prevailing scientific wisdom and the best historical advice - he sunk a shovel into the ground in search of America's birthplace.

His worst nightmare was that the naysayers had it right - that the palisaded fort constructed by Capt. John Smith and the first English settlers on the banks of the James River in 1607 had long ago washed away into the currents. His second was that he and his small staff would find nothing more momentous than the mid- to late-17th-century artifacts that previous archaeologists - digging on adjacent National Park Service land - had already recovered by the millions. His last and most far-fetched worry - conjured up in a contradictory moment of hope and gloom - was the discovery of a horde so large and so rich that his underfunded project would sink beneath the epic scale of the care required.

Ten years after that April 1994 day - and the subsequent unearthing of some 750,000 objects from the early 1600s - only the last of these fears has come close to being true. And even now, Kelso's once daring gamble continues to turn up such a rich array of finds that what he originally imagined as a decade of work seems much nearer its beginning than its end.

Just last summer, the one-time high school history teacher and his colleagues uncovered the last, elusive wall of the triangular fort, mapping its boundaries with unquestionable certainty for the first time. They looked on with wonder as the remains of a long, remarkably sophisticated row of dwellings emerged from the dirt next to this wall, painting a picture of a frontier colony that looks more like downtown Elizabethan London than a rough-hewn pioneer outpost.

By this summer's end, Kelso believes he and his crew will have removed so much soil from an overlying Civil War earthwork that - at long last - they'll be able to look from one corner of James Fort to the other. Somewhere in the center of this painfully defined 1.1-acre space, he says, lies the target he's been looking for all along.

"We were going in all directions before - just trying to establish the outlines of the palisade - and just going 10 feet in the wrong direction can make an incredible difference," Kelso says.

"But now that we know where we are, we can aim right for the heart of the settlement - the common store, the guardhouse and, especially, the church where the first representative assembly met.

"If we can find that, then we've really found what makes Jamestown so important."

Such ambitious goals sound far less crazy now than they did in 1993, when Kelso approached the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities and asked it to sponsor an archaeological excavation on its 22.5-acre Jamestown Island property.

Executive Director Elizabeth Kostelny, who was then a member of the group's "We were going in all directions before - just trying to establish the outlines of the palisade - and just going 10 feet in the wrong direction can make an incredible difference," Kelso says.

Still, Kelso's proposal came at the same time as an alarming membership decline - and a consultant's study that recommended a radical overhaul of the organization's traditional memorial focus. Reaching back to its activist roots, which had saved Jamestown from development back in 1893, the group already was looking for a way to redefine its sense of stewardship through a different and more daring kind of historic preservation.
"In 1907 and 1957, it might have been appropriate for the APVA to erect monuments in honor of the founding of Jamestown," Kostelny says.

"But when we looked at what we wanted our legacy to be, it was not another plaque. It was a research project - and Bill's proposal offered us one that had huge potential."

No one back then knew the outcome of what might have been a nationally embarrassing debacle. Kelso began his pitch, in fact, by asking the APVA's board to hear him out before deciding he was crazy.

What they soon discovered, however, was the enormous amount of new information that the archaeologist had turned up over the previous decade, when - working alongside colleagues Nick Luccketti and Bly Straube - he had uncovered and studied some of the earliest known 17th-century settlement sites in English Colonial America. Using that knowledge, Kelso explained, the trio had meticulously re-examined a small collection of artifacts found on the APVA property during the installation of a water line in the 1930s.

It took only minutes before the objects they saw convinced them that the previous archaeological assessments had been mistaken.

The accompanying drawings of several soil stains, which had long been identified as the remains of a fence, confirmed their suspicions. Though far less robust than earlier investigators had imagined, Kelso argued, at least part of the historic palisade that defined James Fort looked like it still survived - hidden just a few inches under the ground.

"Bill was very conservative," Kostelny recalls. "He told us that he might find nothing and - if he did - that it might be turn out to be inconsequential.

"The traumatic part of the story is that he always promised it would take at least five years to find out if he was right or not. He told us we would have to keep the faith. Then he started digging and was wildly successful almost right away - and that success really stretched our resources."

Kelso was the excavation's sole employee, in fact, when he began working at Jamestown in 1993. He set up shop in an unheated, dilapidated building near the old church, churning out grant proposals under a peeling ceiling on a picnic table converted into an office desk.

Nearly a year passed before he and the APVA found the money to hire both Straube and Luccketti.

Not until April of 1994 did the newly dubbed project, known as Jamestown Rediscovery, put its first shovel into the ground.

"We immediately found these early, early artifacts - earlier than anything that had ever been found - and they all pointed to the Elizabethan era," Kelso recalls. "We found the beginnings of a palisade - and everything started to look pretty good.

"In some ways, it was too easy. So we had to be skeptical. We knew we could have been wrong. My biggest fear was that we had found some kind of later extension and were trying to turn it into the fort."

Kelso's fears became palpable when the line of soil stains that marked the palisade suddenly came to a stop.

Only later, after the archaeologists pushed ahead, did they discover how the split-timber wall had changed shape, moving from a straight line into half-round, military bulwark surrounded by a
shallow moat.

Straube had her moments of nagging doubt, too, especially after the field crew began turning up pound after pound of window glass in a place that wasn't supposed to have windows.

"Once we realized that it was cullet - that it was being used to make new glass - then it made perfect sense," she explained at the time.

"It even gave us a way to date what we were finding."

That early 1608 date - which was based on the settlers' references to an experimental glasshouse, helped cement the archaeologists' original hunches. So did the discovery of a second palisade wall, this one so consistent in its course that the telltale soil stains began to show up in every new test hole that the excavators plotted.

By September 1996, so much evidence had piled up that the identity of the fort seemed conclusive. Kelso and the APVA announced their landmark find at a news conference that attracted international attention.

"We walked over to a newsstand on the way to breakfast that morning and saw the front page picture - then the headline - and then, a little later in the day, the news reports on CNN and the Today show," Kolstelny recalls.

"It was a goose-bumpy moment - a fantastic moment - when Bill finally made the announcement. We'd never been on the map in this way before."

Since that time, much of the excavation has focused on locating the elusive third wall of the fort, which Kelso believed he had to find in order to be absolutely certain.

With each new shovel of dirt unearthed by the search, more and more artifacts have appeared, eventually reaching the kind of numbers that Kelso had both hoped for and feared.

Straube and her staff have cataloged about 500,000 objects so far. But with 250,000 items still waiting in plastic bags - and more being added everyday-their task seems both endless and monumental.

Little time remains to study and interpret anything but the most promising finds, which conjure up such a vivid and detailed portrait of the early 17th-century settlement's life that the collection has become a globally important historical resource.

Tools, weapons, clothing accessories, trade items, personal belongings - even religious objects and toys can be found on Straube's shelves, each of them capable of telling illuminating stories. Stored alongside them are the vegetable and animal remains from which one archaeologist has already reconstructed a provocative picture of the colonists' diets.

"I like them all. I care for them all - because they all have something to say," Straube explains, unable to decide on her favorites.

"But what I really like best is that it's never just singular. It's the information that they give us as a whole that really makes this collection special."

More discoveries wait in the soil, which Civil War laborers piled up as much as 10 feet high when they built their fort over the remains of Jamestown. And it's the lure of uncovering that long-lost landscape and the secrets it holds that keeps Kelso and his colleagues coming back for more.

"Everytime we find something new, there's that same sense of excitement - that same feeling of
euphoria that we had at the beginning," he says.

"Now we're finding buildings. We're going to find the church. And eventually we'll have the entire fort back to its original 17th-century grade. So you'll be able to stand here and imagine what it was like even if we don't reconstruct it."