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Signet ring crowned N.C. archaeologist's career



## Kendal Gold Signet Ring

Kendall is one of the names on our “Lost Colony Hit List”, and a Captain Kendall was captured and executed in Jamestown for being a Spanish spy.



A ring unearthed by archaeologist David S. Phelps was the first evidence that Sir Walter Raleigh's explorers had contacts with the Indians. (The Virginian-Pilot file photo)

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#### **The find**

Although it proved to have no apparent link to the 1587 English colony that vanished from Roanoke Island, the ring unearthed by archaeologist David S. Phelps was the first evidence that Sir Walter Raleigh's explorers had contacts with the Indians. It was discovered at Croatan, in what is called Buxton today.

#### **Want to go?**

What: A celebration of David Phelps' life; all who knew Phelps are invited

When: 11:30 a.m. March 15

Where: Fort Raleigh National Historic Site Visitors Center, Roanoke Island

Contact: (252) 473-5772

By [Catherine Kozak](#)

The Virginian-Pilot

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Digging in the dirt was fine art to David S. Phelps, an archaeologist who electrified colonial historians by unearthing an English nobleman's 16th-century gold signet ring at the birthplace of the Indian who helped the Lost Colony.

Phelps, a professor emeritus of anthropology at East Carolina University in Greenville, died on Feb. 21 at Fort Pierce, Fla. He was 79.

Although the signet proved to have no apparent link to the 1587 English colony that vanished from Roanoke Island, it was the first evidence that Sir Walter Raleigh's explorers had contacts with the Indians. It was discovered at Croatan - Buxton today.

"It was huge," said Dorothy Block, Phelps' partner. "What a marvelous way to end a career."

Block, a 40-year-old archaeologist, said she had a "marriage of the heart" with Phelps for the past seven years.

"The man," she said, "was a giant."

Barbara Midgette, a Buxton volunteer on Phelps' crew, remembers the day in September 1998 when the ring was found.

"Oh, it was extraordinary," she said.

What looked like a small ball of mud was put in the sifter, Midgette recalled. Out of the moist dirt emerged the ring, covered in gray-brown patina.

"Dr. Phelps just went totally ballistic," she said. "He danced around. There was just sheer elation."

The shank of the 10-carat gold ring was broken, but otherwise it was in good condition. Its crest, depicting a prancing lion, was later traced to the Kendall family; two men with that name had participated in the 1584- 87 Roanoke Voyages.

"This is the first direct tie-in we'd had with the Roanoke colonies," Phelps said shortly after the discovery. "This doesn't necessarily mean the Lost Colony was here - but this begins to authenticate that."

After Hurricane Emily in 1993 exposed thousands of pottery pieces and shell midden in Buxton, Phelps, then the director of the East Carolina University Coastal Archaeology Office, was called to the site to explore. Over the course of numerous excavations, the expert on pre historic and Algonkian Indian archaeology determined that it was the remains of the Croatan capital that stretched a half-mile from Cape Creek to Buxton village.

Some historians believe that members of the Lost Colony may have fled to Croatan because it was their Indian friend Manteo's home.

Charles Ewen, director of archaeology laboratories at ECU, said that of the thousands of artifacts that Phelps collected in his more than 30-year career, the ring certainly got the most attention. But, he said, Phelps' work at Neoheroke in Greene County is also significant, as is his work at Jordan's Landing in Bertie County. Both are Tuscarora Indian sites.

"As far as eastern North Carolina archaeology goes, all of our subsequent work sort of builds on David's work," Ewen said. "It was an open field for him, and that was back in the day when archaeologists had their own territory."

When Phelps retired and moved to Florida around 2000, he took his field notes and a number of artifacts with him for further study, with the promise of giving them back to ECU when he was done. But bad weather and health delayed him for years.

Block said that most of the artifacts that Phelps had at his home, including the ring, had been returned to ECU. She said she will return any remaining items, and she will make sure that reports from the field notes are completed.

Whatever friction the overdue loans and reports caused with ECU, Ewen said, was overshadowed by the value of Phelps' work.

"David and I had our differences over stuff, but in the greater scheme, he really did a lot of good," he said. "In a lot of respects, he was an ambassador for us, and he opened a lot of doors for us. So I didn't have to kick them open."

With a strong ego tempered by Southern gentleman ways, Phelps had his loyal followers and his detractors. But no one quibbled about his brilliance.

"There is absolutely no way he can be replaced because of his body of knowledge of the whole Algonkian system," Midgette said. "He could pull it out of his mind, with incredible precision. It's a loss that's just incalculable."

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