First, I would like to thank the 2010 YALSA Nonfiction Award committee members for honoring Written in Bone: Buried Lives of Jamestown and Colonial Maryland in this way. I am immensely flattered to be a part of this inaugural celebration. I also want to thank the editors, photo researcher, designer, and production people at Carolrhoda Books for their outstanding work. They are my powerhouse crew. Last, but not least, I want to thank the colonial settlers who posthumously shared their lives and deaths with me. Through them, I have gained a new respect for the fortitude and perseverance that were required to survive in colonial America. They are the storytellers of our fledgling country. They are the people whose stories are literally written in their bones. I’d like you to tell you about some of them.

At James Fort, in Virginia, a boy 15 to 16 years old died in May 1607. He died as the result of violence, which was evidenced by a broken shoulder bone and a white, triangular arrowpoint that was stuck in his leg. Surprisingly, he would have been dead within weeks anyway. The cause? Raging infection had spread throughout his body, the result
of bacteria that entered into the pulp cavity of one of his lower central incisors. Something as small as a damaged tooth could lead to death in colonial America.

Bartholomew Gosnold’s remains were also found at James Fort. He died in August 1607, at thirty-five years of age. Gosnold was one of the prime movers and shakers behind the Virginia Company’s decision to undertake the Jamestown expedition. He died from one of the fever-inducing illnesses that killed more than 50 percent of all colonists within weeks of their arrival. Had he lived, his name would have been well-known to us as one of the founders of Jamestown.

The Leavy Neck boy was probably an indentured servant who died sometime between 1665 and 1677. Although he was only about 15 years old at the time of his death, he already suffered from arthritis in his spine. The muscle attachment scars on his bones reveal that although he was just a boy, each day he had done a man’s worth of work. Defensive fractures in his hand and arm show that he was beaten at, or just before, the time of his death. Then, his body was buried in a trash pit located in the basement of his owner’s house. To keep his death a secret from the law, the man or woman who buried him couldn’t risk
bringing a shovel into the house. Instead, a broken piece of pottery, which measures about 12 inches wide, was used to dig his grave. After that, the potsherd was used to cram the boy’s body down into his too-short grave.

Anne Calvert, from St. Mary’s City, in the Maryland colony, embodies the word tenacity. Despite all odds—a severely fractured leg bone, medicine that contained arsenic, and the loss of nearly all of her teeth—this woman survived. This was an accomplishment in a place where most people died before they reached the age of 30. Even though she was married to a wealthy, prominent member of the community, her life wasn’t easy. Although her leg bone knitted together, it was a never-ending source of pain, and left her with a noticeable limp.

Some people came to the colonies of their own free will. Others didn’t. It’s likely that the teenage girl found at Harleigh Knoll, in Maryland, was a slave. We don't know her name, or where she was born. Only that she lived in Maryland, worked hard during her life, and died young of an illness that left no trace in her bones. We do know that someone cared about her. Her burial was a respectful one. She was shrouded and then buried in a wood coffin. While I have examined all of
the remains of these colonial people, I feel a special connection with this young lady. I was present during every step of her discovery and helped lift her remains from her grave. You can’t do that without wanting to tell that person’s story.

When you think of the settlers who helped build this country, please remember these people. Thank you for honoring my story of their lives.