

# The Founding of English America: Jamestown

Late in 1609 the Virginia Company of London published a lengthy justification, *A True and Sincere Declaration*, arguing that investors should continue to support the Company's beleaguered colony at Jamestown. Earlier in the year, the Company had dispatched a fleet of eight ships carrying over five hundred colonists bound for Virginia. Little more than a week from reaching the American coast, the fleet was caught in a hurricane that drove its principal ship, the *Sea Venture*, far out to sea where she was believed lost. Hearing the grievous news in the fall, the Company rallied to a bold defense of why they and their supporters should persist with plans for Virginia. The "main ends" of the colony, the Company asserted, were to bring the Christian religion to the Indians, take possession of a new land for the English, and produce commodities that would be of value to the home country. If these were the right and proper goals for the colony when the expedition set out, why should they be abandoned now? Why should this great action of the English be "shaken and dissolved by one storm" (1)?

Yet would it have mattered if the Company had decided to abandon Jamestown in 1609? Would the future course of English America have been significantly different in the long run? Virginia would be the first transatlantic outpost of an empire of goods that in time carried the English language, laws, and institutions across British North America and to every part of the globe. Commerce unlocked the wealth of America for Europeans and fueled an enormous growth in white colonial populations. By the 1680s, hundreds of ships left England annually for American waters carrying manufactured goods and foodstuffs to be



**Figure 1.** Shown in this c.1590 portrait wearing the uniform of the Captain of Queen Elizabeth's personal guard, Sir Walter Raleigh (c.1552–1618) sponsored and established the Roanoke Colony, near the coast of present-day North Carolina. A soldier, pirate, explorer, poet, and once a favorite of the Queen's court, Raleigh epitomized the "renaissance man" ideal. After the death of the Queen, King James I charged Raleigh with treason and imprisoned him in the Tower of London until 1616. (Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)

exchanged for colonial commodities worth hundreds of thousands of pounds sterling. Sugar, the "king of sweets," and tobacco from Virginia and Maryland accounted for more than eighty percent of the value of these goods. While fewer than 5,000 settlers inhabited English America in the 1620s, most of them in Virginia and Bermuda, by 1680, about 150,000 Europeans (the majority English) and 7,000 enslaved Africans lived in settlements stretching some 1200 miles along the North American coast from Maine to the Carolinas (2). Perhaps another colony might have eventually helped fuel this same trajectory, but in the history we know, Jamestown mattered a great deal indeed.

## Roanoke and Its Legacy

Founded in 1607, Jamestown was the first permanent English settlement in North America, but it was not the first English attempt. Twenty years earlier, Sir Walter Raleigh, Queen Elizabeth's favorite, sponsored three expeditions to Roanoke Island, located off the North Carolina mainland, between 1584 and 1587. Every Englishman concerned with such matters knew that all of the European settlements in the New World were under the authority of the Spanish crown. Raleigh intended his colony to serve as a base for English privateers to raid the Spanish West Indies and from which expeditions would be sent into the interior to look for gold mines and a river passage through the mountains to the South Sea (Pacific). In addition, colonists would exploit the natural resources of the land and export valuable goods back to England. Hostilities with local peoples and a series of setbacks in Raleigh's



**Figure 2.** Based on descriptions provided by Captain John Smith (1580–1631), this map shows the vast Chesapeake Bay area and its Indian territories. In the upper-left corner of the map stands Chief Powhatan, leader of a powerful Indian paramount chiefdom encountered and fought by English colonizers. Through the efforts of the Virginia Company of London, the English established their first permanent settlement at Jamestown in 1607. It became a royal colony in 1624 after King James revoked the Virginia Company’s charter. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

efforts to reinforce the colonists combined to doom the settlements, none of which survived for longer than a year (3).

Despite the failure of Raleigh’s efforts, the Roanoke colony had an important influence on the establishment of Jamestown. The mid-Atlantic continued to be viewed by promoters of English colonization as the most likely region for the discovery of precious minerals and a passage to the Pacific Ocean. Accordingly, when the Virginia Company sponsored its first expedition to the Chesapeake Bay, explicit instructions were given to the colonists’ leaders to devote the initial months after landfall exploring the Chesapeake’s rivers and if possible, to seat the colonists on a principal river that might lead eventually to “the Other Sea.” A week after the expedition arrived at Jamestown Island on May 13, 1607, Captain Christopher Newport led a group of two dozen men up the James River, determined, as one contemporary put it, not to return before finding the “head of this River, the Lake mentioned by others heretofore, the Sea again, the Mountains Apalatsi [Appalachians], or some issue” (4).

First impressions were promising. Some weeks later, as Newport prepared to return to England, the colony’s leaders wrote a letter to the Virginia Company advising a second expedition be dispatched as soon as possible to prevent the Spanish from laying their “ravenous hands upon these gold showing mountains.” Knowing that Newport would provide a full report as soon as he reached London, they gave little more than a hint of future profits, but one of the settlers, William Brewster, could hardly restrain his enthusiasm. Writing to his patron, Robert Cecil, the Earl of Salisbury, he described Virginia as the richest kingdom in the world and predicted that “you yet may live to see England, more rich and renowned than any kingdom in all Europe” (5).

Such early enthusiasm gradually faded. After five years of searching along the rivers and into the piedmont for precious minerals and a river passage through the mountains, the English had nothing to show for their efforts. Frustrated by the lack of success, Captain John Smith put into words what might serve as an epitaph



**Figure 3.** As ubiquitous as tobacco leaves in Virginia, representations of Pocahontas and John Smith are still at the center of popular understandings of colonial America. On this packaging label, a drawing of Pocahontas begging her father, Chief Powhatan, to spare John Smith's, life is used to sell tobacco. Pocahontas, however, married another English colonist, John Rolfe, in 1614. Three years later, Pocahontas fell ill and died in England. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

for the first generation of English colonizers, those of Roanoke and early Virginia:

It was the Spaniards good hap [luck] to happen in those parts where were infinite numbers of people, who had manured the ground with that providence, it afforded victuals at all times. And time had brought them to that perfection they had the use of gold and silver, and the most of such commodities as those Countries afforded: so that what the Spaniard got was chiefly the spoil and pillage of those Country people, and not the labors of their own hands. . . . But we chanced in a Land even as God made it, where we found only an idle, improvident, scattered people, ignorant of the knowledge of gold or silver, or any commodities, and careless of anything but from hand to mouth, except baubles of no worth; nothing to encourage us, but what accidentally we found Nature afforded.

Virginia was no Mexico or Peru, and as hopes of finding fabulous wealth diminished, the Virginia Company turned once more to a mercantile vision of the potential of the New World (6).

### Expansion and Conflict

After 1611, Company leaders vigorously promoted the kind of commodities—crops, fish, oils, wines, medicinal drugs, dyestuffs, soap ashes, timber, iron, and copper—they confidently believed would find a ready market in Europe. Rather than this wide variety of goods, tobacco proved to be the salvation of the colony. Frowned upon by the Company, who believed the “stinking weed” would be no more than a short-lived fad, tobacco quickly brought settlers and investors the wealth that had hitherto eluded them. The widespread adoption of cultivation along the James River Valley transformed the colony within a few years, attracting more settlers and providing a lucrative crop for London merchants. Tens of thousands of acres were granted to individuals and groups of private investors in what amounted to the colony's first land rush (7).

The resistance of local peoples allied to the Powhatan chiefdom led by Wahunsonacock (Chief Powhatan) and Opechancanough, failed to prevent the steady expansion of white settlements along the James

River. The colonists largely ignored the misery they had brought to the Powhatans and, responding to violence with violence, unleashed brutal raids on Indian communities, killing the people and destroying their towns and crops. After the end of hostilities in 1614, the Virginia Company followed a policy of education and conversion to achieve an accommodation of settlers and Indians on the colonists' terms. Charitable collections by the Anglican Church in England were made for the establishment of a college for training “the Children of those Infidels in true Religion, moral virtue, and Civility.” This most Christian, honorable, and glorious work, asserted John Ferrar, deputy treasurer of the Company, was of great consequence to the colony, “whereof both Church and commonwealth take their original foundation and happy estate.” The marriage of Pocahontas, one of Wahunsonacock's favored daughters, to John Rolfe in 1614 was interpreted by the colony's leaders as a sure sign that their policy was reaping rewards and raised hopes that in time all Powhatan peoples would be brought into the Church of England and converted to English ways. The Virginia Company's sincere but misguided attempt to convert Indian peoples to Christianity represents the only example of an English effort in North America to bring an entire people into the national church (8).

### Recruiting a Labor Force

Encouraged by signs that the colony's economic prospects were improving and determined to ensure that sufficient laborers were available to work on the growing number of plantations along the James River, the Company launched a campaign to recruit settlers from all over England. In 1618, six ships embarked for the colony carrying about 400 settlers; by 1621, 50 ships had transported some 3,750 settlers to Virginia, including paupers from the streets of London, “choice men, born and bred up to labor and industry,” and a few hundred Puritans who established plantations on the south side of the James River. Contrary to some depictions of early Virginia, many of these new arrivals provided valuable labor for the colony. Of the 120 settlers who arrived on board the *Bona Nova*, for example, which docked at Jamestown in November 1619, were one hundred “tenants” (all male) sent to work on Company lands: husbandmen, cloth and leather workers, blacksmiths, carpenters, cooks, bakers, grocers, and laborers. During 1619 and early 1620, they were joined by the governor, Sir George Yeardley, another 280 tenants for public use, ninety “young maids to make wives” for planters, some 150 vagrant children sent from Bridewell Royal Hospital, London, and a handful of African captives from Angola (West Central Africa) (9).

These first Africans in English North America arrived by a circuitous route. Captives taken by the Portuguese in wars in Angola during 1618–1619, the majority were most likely Kimbundu-speaking peoples from the kingdom of Ndongo. Many would have come from urban backgrounds and had possibly been introduced to the rudiments of Christianity since Portuguese law required all enslaved captives to be baptized Catholics before arrival in America. They were among the approximately 350 slaves who had been placed on board the *St. John the Baptist* bound for Veracruz in the summer of 1619. En route, the ship was attacked in the Gulf of Campeche, off the coast of Mexico, by two privateers and robbed of some of their human cargo. The privateers, a Dutch man-of-war, the *White Lion*, and an English ship, the *Treasurer*, sailed to the West Indies and then onto Virginia where some of the Angolans were traded. These Africans' arrival in Virginia resulted in lives spent laboring on tobacco plantations rather than working in the port towns, silver mines, or cane fields of Spanish America (10).

### Seeds of Self-Government

As the settler population grew and more land was taken up, the Company instructed the governor in late 1618 to introduce “just Laws for the happy guiding and governing of the people.” To assure investors and settlers who established private (“particular”) plantations that they would have control

over their own workers and lands and be consulted in running the colony, two new councils were created: a council of state, whose members were selected by the Company in London to assist the governor in his duties, and a General Assembly that included the council and a house of burgesses made up of two burgesses from every town, hundred, and particular plantation chosen by the free inhabitants. The governor retained a right of veto, and legislation passed by the Assembly could be enforced only if the Company approved. The Assembly was to be convened once a year, unless extraordinary occasions demanded more frequent meetings, and was authorized to consider all matters concerning the colony and to propose such measures for the better ordering of the settlers' affairs in conformity (or as near as possible) with laws and customs in England.

An account of the first meeting of the General Assembly, convened on July 30, 1619, suggests the matters they considered important. Twenty-two burgesses gathered in the choir of the new-built church at Jamestown, and after being led in prayer by the resident minister and taking the oath of allegiance to James I, settled down to business. They debated their own procedures and membership, considered complaints brought against individual settlers, ordered that everyone attend church in the morning and afternoon of the Sabbath, regulated against idleness, gaming, drunkenness, and excess of apparel, and brought forward recommendations to maintain the peace and promote the conversion of the Indians to Christianity. They went on to set a standard price for the sale of tobacco and encouraged the cultivation of corn, hemp, flax, vines, and mulberry trees, echoing the Company's desire to promote a range of products. Concluding after five days, the burgesses were likely pleased with the promising start to a new era in which they, representatives of the settlers, would henceforth exert a growing influence on the running of the colony (11).

### Crisis and Survival

The colony experienced harrowing times during the next few years. A large number of the immigrants who had poured into Virginia after 1618 perished of disease or malnutrition, succumbing to poor conditions during the Atlantic crossing and in the colony. A massive uprising by the Powhatans in March 1622, orchestrated by Opechancanough, resulted in the death of hundreds of settlers and devastated lands on both sides of the James River from the falls to below Jamestown. The "barbarous massacre," as the English called it, eventually led to the collapse of the Virginia Company in 1624 (amid a welter of recriminations between opposing merchant factions) and the inception of royal government a year later (12).

Still, the colony endured. By the mid-1620s, the tobacco trade was thriving and the colony's population had largely recovered to its pre-uprising level. Jamestown grew rapidly. Although a far cry from the great cities and bustling market towns that English and European settlers (as well as some Angolans) would have known, the colony's capital

was at least beginning to take on the semblance of an urban community; as was an additional settlement, Elizabeth City at the mouth of the James, where planters were said to "enjoy their health and live as plentifully as in any part of England" (13).

### Conclusion

Virginia was the first English colony to survive in North America. Had Jamestown been abandoned in 1609 or 1610, the English might never have established themselves as the major colonial power on the mainland. Other European nations, such as the Spanish, French, or Dutch, might have colonized the mid-Atlantic region. There was nothing inevitable about the spread of English settlements along the North Atlantic seaboard in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Early North America was littered with lost colonies: the Spanish in Florida, French at Fort Caroline and Port Royal, and English at Baffin Island, Roanoke, and Sagadahoc (Maine). Few colonies lasted more than a year. The challenge of novel environmental conditions, harsh winters, disease, hostile Indians (or other Europeans), providing sufficient provisions for hungry settlers, and the sheer cost of the ventures overwhelmed most colonizing efforts (14).

At Jamestown, the English learned hard but important lessons about how to sustain a colony in America. Critical was the creation of stable political and social institutions—representative government, the church, private property, and establishment of family life—as well as the discovery of a lucrative commodity. Through trial and error, Karen Kupperman argues, Jamestown's "settlers and their backers in England figured out what it would take to make an English colony work." Jamestown, she points out, was not just the first English colony to survive in America; its significance lies in being "the archetype of English colonization." All other English colonies followed the model of Jamestown (15). Representative government, established at Jamestown in 1619, would eventually flower into a vibrant political culture in British colonies and contribute to a new republican credo and political order expressed in the founding of the United States, which

itself would become an inspiration to all peoples seeking, in Thomas Jefferson's words, the "blessings and security of self-government." None of this should obscure the appalling consequences of European colonization for Indian peoples and enslaved Africans. Yet in the history of the founding of Jamestown can be glimpsed lines of development that continued to influence British America and the United States long after (16). □

### Endnotes

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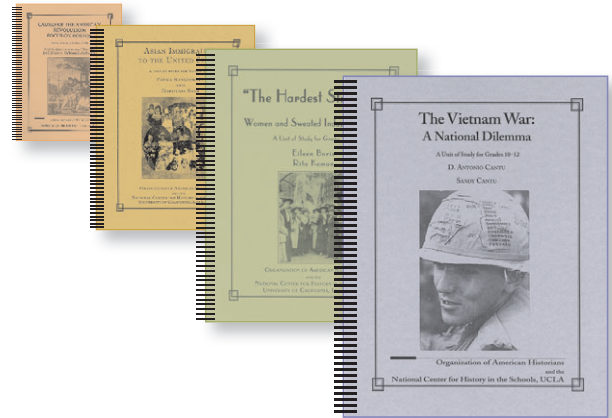


**Figure 4.** President Theodore Roosevelt delivers the opening address at the Jamestown Exposition of 1907. The World's Fair celebrated the tercentennial of Jamestown and linked the founding of the colony to the emergence of the United States as a world power. The federal government's commitment to hold the Fair in an isolated location in eastern Virginia suggests the relevance of the first successful English settlement in the making of a modern American identity. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

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James Horn is Vice President of Research and Historical Interpretation and O’Neill Director of the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. He is the author of numerous books and articles on the early history of the Chesapeake, including *A Land As God Made It: Jamestown and the Birth of America* (Basic Books, 2005) and *A Kingdom Strange: The Brief and Tragic History of the Lost Colony of Roanoke* (Basic Books, 2010).

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