

JOHN WHITE'S ATTEMPT TO RESCUE THE ROANOKE COLONISTS

Carolina coast__1590

John White, *The Fifth Voyage of M. John White
into the West Indies and Parts of America
called Virginia, in the year 1590*

__Excerpts__

In 1587 John White led the third Raleigh-financed voyage to Roanoke Island; it was the first to include women and children to create a stable English colony on the Atlantic coast. Soon the colonists agreed that White should return to England for supplies. White was unable to return to Roanoke for three years, however, due to French pirate attacks and England's war with Spain. Finally, in August 1590, White returned to Roanoke Island.



The 20 of March the three ships the *Hopewell*, the *John Evangelist*, and the *Little John*, put to sea from Plymouth [England] with two small shallops.¹ . . .

AUGUST.

On the first of August the wind scanted [reduced], and from thence forward we had very foul weather with much rain, thundering, and great spouts, which fell round about us nigh unto our ships.

The 3 we stood again in for the shore, and at midday we took the height of the same. The height of that place we found to be 34 degrees of latitude. Towards night we were within three leagues of the low sandy islands west of Wokokon. But the weather continued so exceeding foul, that we could not come to an anchor near the coast: wherefore we stood off again to sea until Monday the 9 of August.

On Monday the storm ceased, and we had very great likelihood of fair weather: therefore we stood in again for the shore: & came to an anchor at 11 fathoms in 35 degrees of latitude, within a mile of the shore, where we went on land on the narrow sandy island, being one of the islands west of Wokokon: in this island we took in some fresh water and caught great store of fish in the shallow water. Between the main[land] (as we supposed) and that island it was but a mile over and three or four feet deep in most places.

On the 12 in the morning we departed from thence and toward night we came to an anchor at the northeast end of the island of Croatoan, by reason of a breach which we perceived to lie out two or three leagues into the sea: here we rode all that night. . . .

The 15 of August towards evening we came to an anchor at Hatorask [Hatteras], in 36 degr. and one third, in five fathoms water, three leagues from the shore. At our first coming to anchor on this shore we saw a great smoke rise in the isle Raonoke [*sic*] near the place where I left our colony in the year 1587, which smoke put us in good hope that some of the colony were there expecting my return out of England.

The 16 and next morning our boats went ashore, & Captain Cooke, & Cap. Spicer, & their company with me, with intent to pass to the place at Raonoke, where our countrymen were left. At our putting from the ship we commanded our master gunner to make ready two minions and a falcon well loaded,² and to

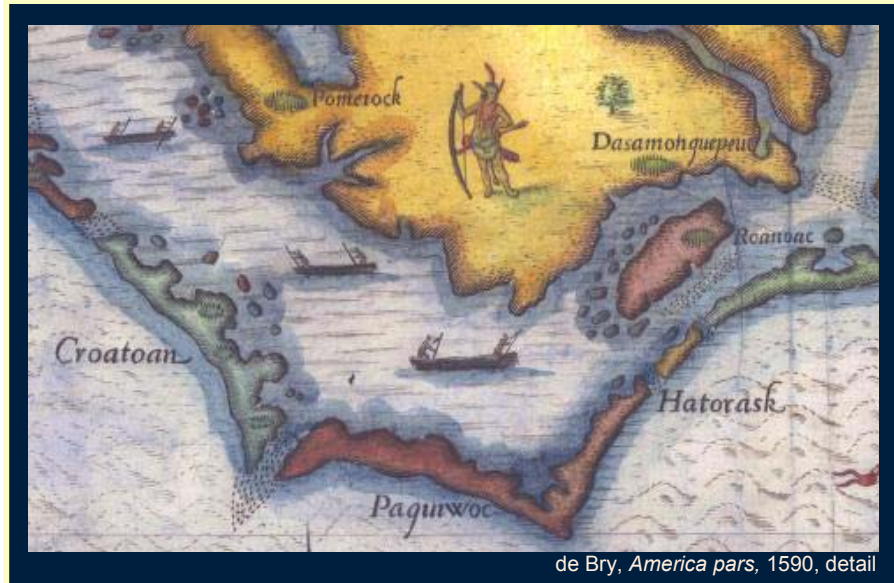
Excerpted, images and footnotes added, and spelling and punctuation modernized by the National Humanities Center, 2006: www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/pds.htm. In Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation*, 1590. Full text in Virtual Jamestown at etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/jamestown-browsemod?id=J1019. Complete image credits at www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/amerbegin/imagecredits.htm.

¹ Shallop: A large, partly-decked boat, rigged with lugsails and used in the cod and seal fisheries. [Canada's Digital Collections]

² Minion, falcon: small cannons.

shoot them off with reasonable space between every shot, to the end that their reports might be heard to the place where we hoped to find some of our people. This was accordingly performed, & our two boats put off unto the shore, in the Admiral's boat we sounded all the way and found from our ship until we came within a mile of the shore nine, eight, and seven fathoms: but before we were halfway between our ships and the shore we saw another great smoke to the southwest of Kindriker's mountains:³ we therefore thought good to go to the second smoke first: but it was much further from the harbor where we landed, then we supposed it to be, so that we were very sore tired before we came to the smoke. But that which grieved us more was that when we came to the smoke, we found no man nor sign that any had been there lately, nor yet any fresh water in all this way to drink. Being thus wearied with this journey we returned to the harbor where we left our boats, who in our absence had brought their cask ashore for fresh water, so we deferred our going to Roanoak [*sic*] until the next morning, and caused some of those sailors to dig in those sandy hills for fresh water whereof we found very sufficient. That night we returned aboard with our boats and our whole company in safety.


The next morning being the 17 of August, our boats and company were prepared again to go up to Roanoak, but Captain Spicer had then sent his boat ashore for fresh water, by means whereof it was ten of the clock afore



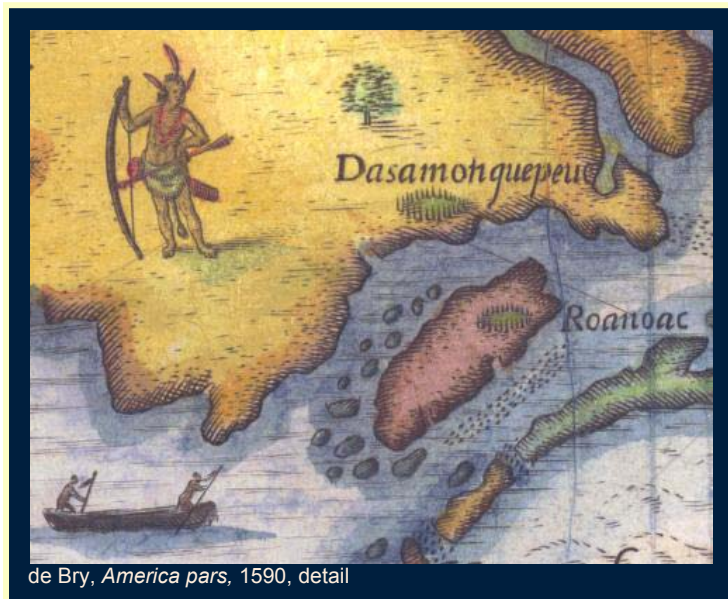
de Bry, *America pars*, 1590, detail

noon before we put from our ships which were then come to an anchor within two miles of the shore. The Admiral's boat was halfway toward the shore, when Captain Spicer put off from his ship. The Admiral's boat first passed the breach, but not without some danger of sinking, for we had a sea break into our boat which filled us half full of water, but by the will of God and careful steerage of Captain Cooke we came safe ashore, saving only that our furniture, victuals, match and powder were much wet and spoiled. For at this time the wind blew at northeast and direct into the harbor so great a gale, that the sea broke extremely on the [sand]bar, and the tide went very forcibly at the entrance. By that time our Admiral's boat was hauled ashore, and most of our things taken out to dry, Captain Spicer came to the entrance of the breach with his mast standing up, and was half passed over, but by the rash and indiscreet steerage of Ralph Skinner his master's mate, a very dangerous sea broke into their boat and overset them quite, the men kept the boat some in it, and some hanging on it, but the next sea set the boat on ground, where it beat so, that some of them were forced to let go their hold, hoping to wade ashore; but the sea still beat them down, so that they could neither stand nor swim, and the boat twice or thrice was turned the keel upward, whereon Captain Spicer and Skinner hung until they sunk, & were seen no more. But four that could swim a little kept themselves in deeper water and were saved by Captain Cooke's means, who so soon as he saw their oversetting, stripped himself, and four other that could swim very well, & with all haste possible rowed unto them, & saved four. They were 11 in all, & 7 of the chiefest were drowned, whose names were Edward Spicer, Ralph Skinner, Edward Kelley, Thomas Bevis, Hance the Surgeon, Edward Kelborne, Robert Coleman. This mischance did so much discomfort the sailors, that they were all of one mind not to go any further to seek the planters. But in the end by the commandment & persuasion of me

³ "Kindrikers mountains," or Kenricks Mount: a large Outer Banks sand dune, as named on the earlier expeditions. [David Stick, *Roanoke Island: The Beginnings of English America*, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Press, 1983]

and Captain Cooke, they prepared the boats: and seeing the captain and me so resolute, they seemed much more willing. Our boats and all things fitted again, we put off from Hatorask, being the number of 19 persons in both boats: but before we could get to the place, where our planters were left, it was so exceeding dark, that we overshot the place a quarter of a mile: there we spied towards the north end of the island the light of a great fire through the woods, to the which we presently rowed: when we came right over against it, we let fall our grapnel [anchor] near the shore, & sounded with a trumpet a call, & afterwards many familiar English tunes of songs, and called to them friendly; but we had no answer, we therefore landed at day-break, and coming to the fire, we found the grass & sundry rotten trees burning about the place. From hence we went through the woods to that part of the island directly over against Dasamongwepeuk, & from thence we returned by the water side, round about the north point of the island, until we came to the place where I left our colony in the year 1586. In all this way we saw in the sand the print of the savages' feet of 2 or 3 sorts trodden the night, and as we entered up the sandy bank upon a tree, in the very brow thereof were curiously carved these fair Roman letters C R O which letters presently we knew to signify the place, where I should find the planters seated, according to a secret token agreed upon between them & me at my last departure from them, which was, that in any ways they should not fail to write or carve on the trees or posts of the doors the name of the place where they should be seated; for at my coming always they were prepared to remove from Roanoak 50 miles into the mainland. Therefore at my departure from them in An[no Domini] 1587 I willed them, that if they should happen to be distressed in any of those places, that then they should carve over the letters or name, a Cross  in this form, but we found no such sign of distress. And having well considered of this, we passed toward the place where they were left in sundry houses, but we found the houses taken down, and the place very strongly enclosed with a high pallisade of great trees, with cortynes [curtains] and flankers⁴ very fortlike, and one of the chief trees or posts at the right side of the entrance had the bark taken off, and 5 feet from the ground in fair capital letters was graven CROATOAN without any cross or sign of distress; this done, we entered into the pallisade, where we found many bars of iron, two pigs of lead, four iron fowlers, iron sacker-shot, and such like heavy things, thrown here and there, almost overgrown with grass and weeds. From thence we went along by the water side, towards the point of the creek to see if we could find any of their boats or pinnaces, but we could perceive no sign of them, nor any of the last falcons and small

ordinance which were left with them, at my departure from them. At our return from the creek, some of our sailors meeting us, told that they had found where divers chests had been hidden, and long since dug up again and broken up, and much of the goods in them spoiled and scattered about, but nothing left, of such things as the savages knew any use of, undefaced. Presently Captain Cooke and I went to the place, which was in the end of an old trench, made two years past by Captain Amadas: where we found five chests, that had been carefully hidden of the Planters, and of the same chests three were my own, and about the place many of my things spoiled and broken, and my books torn from the covers, the frames of some of my pictures and maps rotten and



de Bry, *America pars*, 1590, detail

spoiled with rain, and my armor almost eaten through with rust; this could be no other but the deed of the savages our enemies at Dasamongwepeuk, who had watched the departure of our men to Croatoan; and as

⁴ Flankers: the two stones which adjoin the prostrate stone in a recumbent stone circle. [StonePages.com]

soon as they were departed dug up every place where they suspected any thing to be buried: but although it much grieved me to see such spoil of my goods, yet on the other side I greatly joyed that I had safely found a certain token of their safe being at Croatoan, which is the place where Manteo was born, and the savages of the island our friends.⁵

When we had seen in this place so much as we could, we returned to our boats, and departed from the shore towards our ships, with as much speed as we could: For the weather began to overcast, and very likely that a foul and stormy night would ensue. Therefore the same evening with much danger and labor, we got ourselves aboard, by which time the wind and seas were so greatly risen, that we doubted our cables and anchors would scarcely hold until morning: wherefore the captain caused the boat to be manned with five lusty men, who could swim all well, and sent them to the little island on the right hand of the harbor, to bring aboard six of our men, who had filled our cask with fresh water: the boat the same night returned aboard with our men, but all our cask ready filled they left behind, impossible to be had aboard without danger of casting away both men and boats: for this night proved very stormy and foul.

The next morning it was agreed by the captain and myself, with the master and others, to weigh anchor, and go for the place at Croatoan, where our planters were: for that then the wind was good for that place, and also to leave that cask with fresh water on shore in the island until our return. So then they brought the cable to the capston, but when the anchor was almost aboard, the cable broke, by means whereof we lost another anchor, wherewith we drove so fast into the shore, that we were forced to let fall a third anchor: which came so fast home that the ship was almost aground by Kenrick's mount: so that we were forced to let slip the cable end for end. And if it had not chanced that we had fallen into a channel of deeper water, closer by the shore than we accounted for, we could never have gone clear of the point that lies to the southward of Kenrick's mount. Being thus clear of some dangers, and gotten into deeper waters, but not without some loss: for we had but one cable and anchor left us of four, and the weather grew to be fouler and fouler; our victuals scarce, and our cask and fresh water lost: it was therefore determined that we should go for Saint John or some other island to the southward for fresh water. . . .

OCTOBER.

The 2. of October in the Morning we saw S. Michael's Island on our starboard quarter.

The 23. at 10. of the clock before noon, we saw Ushant in Brittany.

On Saturday the 24. we came in safety, God be thanked, to an anchor in Plymouth [England].



Excavation of Fort Raleigh on Roanoke Island, late 1940s



Iron sickle found during the excavation

⁵ Manteo, a Croatoan Indian, had travelled to England with the explorers of the first expedition in 1584, returning with the second expedition in 1585 and with the third colonizing expedition of 1587.