

Jamestown: The First English Colony

Columbus's voyages inspired John Cabot, an Italian living in England, to seek his own western route to Asia. In 1497, Cabot, who had moved to England from Venice, sailed west across the Atlantic. He landed in Newfoundland, an island off the coast of Canada. A fellow Venetian living in London wrote of Cabot's brief landing,

He coasted for three hundred leagues and landed; saw no human beings, but he has brought here to the king certain snares which had been set to catch game, and a needle for making nets; he also found some felled trees, by which he judged there were inhabitants, and returned to his ship in alarm . . . The discoverer . . . planted on this newly-found land a large cross, with one flag of England and another of St. Mark [the patron saint of Venice] on account of his being a Venetian.

Like Columbus, Cabot mistakenly believed he had landed in Asia. The flag that Cabot planted in 1497 to claim the land he found opened the way for more English settlers who wished to create a new life in North America.

The Lost Colony of Roanoke Nearly a century after Cabot, an English noble named Sir Walter Raleigh tried to start a colony on Roanoke Island off the coast of present-day North Carolina. American Indians on the island welcomed the settlers and gave them traps for catching fish. The newcomers, however, were more interested in looking for gold than fishing. When their supplies ran low, they returned to England.

In 1587, Raleigh sent a second group of colonists to Roanoke. Unfortunately, they arrived too late in the season to plant crops. Their leader, John White, sailed back to England for more supplies. While White was in England, however, fighting broke out between England and Spain. As a result, his return to Roanoke was delayed for three years.

When White finally reached the island, the colonists had disappeared. Carved on a doorpost was the word CROATOAN. To this day, both the reason this word was carved and what happened to the lost colony of Roanoke remain a mystery.

Settling Jamestown Twenty years went by before a permanent English colony was established in America. In 1607, a group of merchants formed the London Company to start a moneymaking colony in Virginia. The company crammed 105 settlers and 39 sailors into three tiny ships and sent them across the Atlantic. The settlers were to ship back valuable goods such as furs and timber.

When they reached Virginia, the colonists settled on a swampy peninsula they believed could be easily defended against American Indians or Spanish ships. They called their new home Jamestown after King James I. What the settlers didn't know was that the spot they chose to settle would soon be swarming with disease-carrying mosquitoes. It was also surrounded by a large and powerful American Indian tribe called the Powhatan.

To make matters worse, the Jamestown settlers were a mix of gentlemen and craftsmen. None of them knew much about farming, nor were they willing to work very hard at it. They thought they were in Virginia to look for gold, not to provide for themselves.

As the food the settlers had brought with them disappeared, the settlers began to trade with the Powhatan, bartering glass beads and iron hatchets for corn and meat. But barter wasn't easy. Many Powhatan people decided they would sooner kill the English—or just let them starve—than trade. Hunger and disease soon took their toll. Every few days, another body was carried off to the graveyard.

John Smith was one of the members of the Jamestown expedition. A natural leader, Smith took control of Jamestown in 1608. “If any would not work,” announced Smith, “neither should he eat.” They were hungry, so they worked.



Smith wrote an account of how he met a Powhatan girl whose help saved the colony from starvation. While scouting for food, Smith was captured by the American

Indians and brought to a smoky longhouse. Seated at one end, he saw the powerful chief of the Powhatan tribe. The tribe greeted Smith with a loud shout and a great feast. But when the meal ended, the mood changed. Smith was about to be clubbed to death when a young girl leapt out of the shadows. “She got [my] head in her armes and laid her owne upon [mine] to save [me] from death,” Smith later wrote.

Smith's savior was Pocahontas, Chief Powhatan's favorite daughter. Historians disagree about the details of how Smith and Pocahontas first met. They do agree, however, that Pocahontas helped Smith save Jamestown by bringing food and keeping peace with her people. “She, next under God,” Smith wrote, “was . . . the instrument to preserve this colony from death, famine, and utter confusion.”

The Starving Time Jamestown's troubles, however, were far from over. In the fall of 1609, after being injured in a gunpowder explosion, Smith returned to England. The following winter was the worst one yet—so bad that it came to be known as the “Starving Time.”

Without the encouragement of Smith and Pocahontas, the Powhatan refused to trade with the settlers. The English ate dogs, rats, and even human corpses to survive. By spring, only 60 of the 500 people Smith had left in the fall remained alive.

When supply ships came the next spring, the survivors were ordered to abandon their colony. Then three more English ships brought food, 150 new colonists, and 100 soldiers. Jamestown was saved again.

Jamestown Survives Even with more settlers, the people of Jamestown lived in constant danger of attacks by the American Indians. To end that threat, the English kidnapped Pocahontas and held her hostage. For a year, Pocahontas remained a prisoner—but a willing and curious one. During that time she learned English, adopted the Christian faith, and made new friends.

Among those new friends was a widower named John Rolfe. Rolfe had already helped the colony survive by finding a crop that could be raised in Virginia and sold for good prices in England—tobacco. The happy settlers went tobacco mad, planting the crop everywhere, even in Jamestown's streets.

Rolfe helped again by making a marriage proposal to Pocahontas. Both the governor of Jamestown and Chief Powhatan gave their consent to this unusual match. Maybe they hoped the marriage would help end the conflict between their peoples.

The union of Pocahontas and John Rolfe did bring peace to Jamestown. In 1616, Rolfe wrote, "Our people yearly plant and reap quietly, and travel in the woods . . . as freely and securely from danger . . . as in England."