

LIFE AT JAMESTOWN

Introduction

In May of 1607, three small ships – the *Discovery*, *Godspeed* and *Susan Constant* – landed at what we know today as Jamestown. On board were 104 men and boys, plus crew members, who had left England on a bitter cold December day. Sailing down the Thames River with little fanfare, they were unnoticed by all but a few curious onlookers. The ships were packed with supplies they thought would be most needed in this new land. Sponsors of the voyage hoped the venture would become an economic prize for England. An earlier undertaking in the 1580s on Roanoke Island, in what is now North Carolina, had failed, but



times had changed. England had signed a peace treaty with Spain, and was

now looking westward to establish colonies along the northeastern seaboard of North America. Word was that the Spanish had found “mountains of gold” in this new land, so these voyagers were intent on finding riches as well as a sea route to Asia. Little did the settlers know as they disembarked on this spring day, May 14, 1607, how many and what kinds of hardships they would face as they set out to fulfill their dreams of riches and adventure in Virginia.



Life at Jamestown is a story of the struggles of the English colonists as they encountered the Powhatan Indians, whose ancestors had lived on this land for centuries, as well as their struggles among themselves as they tried to work and live with people of different backgrounds and social classes. It is the story of everyday life in an unfamiliar environment at Jamestown, including perilous times such as the “starving time” during 1609-10 and the expansion of the colony when more colonists, including women, came to strengthen the settlement and make it more permanent. Most important, *Life at Jamestown* is the story of people – of human bravery, cruelty and a grim determination to survive which ultimately laid the foundation for our country today.

Why did England wish to establish colonies?

Conditions in England during the 16th and 17th centuries reflected great changes which were taking place in both rural and urban areas. Economic changes centered on sheep and the demand for woolen cloth. Through a series of legal actions, known as the “Enclosure Acts”, English landowners were allowed to enclose their farms and fence off large areas as grazing lands for sheep. This made available large amounts of wool which merchants sold throughout Europe. It also meant that farmers who had rented their small plots of land from large landowners were uprooted and drifted from the countryside to towns and cities looking for work. While landowners, wool manufacturers and merchants



amassed great wealth, many of the migrants were reduced to begging or stealing to survive. Migrating to a new world seemed a hopeful choice for many of these people, as it did for English leaders who saw colonies as a way to solve the problems of the growing numbers of displaced and poor people. England was looking at the settlement of colonies as a way of fulfilling its desire to sell more goods and resources to other countries than it bought. If colonies could send raw materials, such as lumber, from the abundance of natural resources available in the colonies, then England would not have to buy these from other countries. At the same time, colonies could be markets for England’s manufactured goods. England knew that establishing colonies was an expensive and risky business. The organization of business ventures by merchants, blessed by the crown, served both the economic and political interests of the country.



All of these factors were at play when a group of merchants formed a joint-stock company called the Virginia Company of London. In 1606 King James I granted the Virginia Company its first charter, which included the right to establish colonies in Virginia and extended all rights of Englishmen to colonists. Under this charter, wealthy men invested money to finance ships and supplies needed for the voyage to Virginia. A royal council made up of 13 members was appointed by King James to govern the enterprise. The area designated was between 34 and 41 degrees latitude. Another branch of the company, the Virginia Company of Plymouth, was granted the right to settle another area between 38 and 45 degrees latitude.



Who were these voyagers who sailed to Virginia?

A little over a third of the newly-arrived settlers were described as “gentlemen.” These men were from among the gentry in England and had been recruited by some of the financial backers of the enterprise. Many of the first colonists had military experience – several were ex-soldiers and privateers who had fought against the Spanish or in the Irish wars. The leaders of the Virginia Company sent men with military background because of the potential threat of conflict with the Spanish and the native Powhatan Indians. Among the non-gentry were a dozen skilled craftsmen and artisans – a blacksmith, a mason, two bricklayers, four carpenters, a tailor, a barber and two surgeons. The rest of the company was made up of unskilled workers of various kinds including common seamen, laborers and four boys.

Captain Christopher Newport, the expedition’s most experienced mariner, commanded the largest of the three ships, the *Susan Constant*. Bartholomew Gosnold commanded the *Godspeed*, and John Ratcliffe captained the smallest ship, the *Discovery*. Also among the crew was another man who would acquire his own recognition in this new land, Captain John Smith. Smith had earned fame on the battlefields of Europe but feuded constantly with those who were in command on this

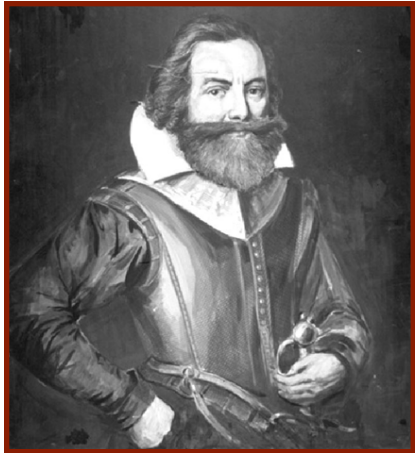
voyage and arrived at Jamestown having been “restrained” as a prisoner while on board the Susan Constant. In addition to strong disagreements which bordered on mutiny, the men aboard the three small ships suffered through a terrible storm which caused the mariners to lose their bearings for a few days.



On the morning of April 26, they spotted the capes around the entrance to the Chesapeake Bay, a body of salt water fed by the Atlantic Ocean that meets fresh water from four rivers. The English named these rivers the Potomac, Rappahannock, York and James. These tributaries are tidal estuaries with tides being felt 75 – 100 miles upstream. Before heading to the interior, and ultimately finding the marsh-rimmed peninsula where they would dock their ships, Captain Newport placed a cross at the entrance of the Bay and gave the cape its name, Cape Henry, after the king’s eldest son, Prince Henry.



Captain Newport opened the sealed orders from the Virginia Company and read the names of those who would run the colony. The names had been kept secret throughout the voyage, perhaps to reduce strife and jealousy. Edward Maria Wingfield, one of the company’s earliest investors and one of the few investors to make the voyage



himself, was elected president. Captain Bartholomew Gosnold and John Ratcliffe were also named to the council, as were George Kendall and John Martin. The earlier imprisoned Captain John Smith was included on the list of councilors. Captain Newport was a councilor for about six weeks which was as long as he stayed in Virginia. These were the men who were to take charge of beginning the formidable task of settlement on the land they were to name “Jamestown” in honor of their king, James I.

Because one of the goals of the English voyage was to find a “Northwest Passage” to Asia, a week after their arrival, several men, including John Smith and Christopher Newport, continued sailing up the James River. They discovered they could not go further when they encountered the fall line where the area we know as the Piedmont begins. Here, the rapids flow over the hard rocks of the Piedmont region, marking the natural end of navigation in the rivers. Though the river did not lead to a great lake as the explorers had hoped, they considered the voyage a great success. They erected a cross carrying the inscription “Jacobus Rex,” which was intended to show that the English now claimed ownership of all the lands along the James River. It was also on this voyage that Newport learned of the existence of the great king, Wahunsonacock, who ruled over the Indians in this area.

Who were the inhabitants of the land around Jamestown and how did they live?

The Powhatan people were a group of Eastern Woodland Indians who occupied the Coastal Plain or Tidewater region of Virginia, which includes the area east of the fall line and the area we know today as the Eastern Shore. They were sometimes referred to as Algonquians because of the Algonquian language they spoke and because of their common culture. At the time the English arrived in 1607, ancestors of the Powhatan people had been living in eastern Virginia for as long as 16,000 years. The paramount chief of the Powhatan Indians was Wahunsonacock, who ruled over a loose chiefdom of approximately 32 tribes. The English called him “Powhatan” and the people he ruled the “Powhatans.” The tribes had their own chiefs called werowances (male) and werowansquas (female) who lived in separate villages but shared many things in common, such as religious beliefs and cultural traditions. Everyone paid tribute taxes, such as deerskins, shell beads, copper or corn to the local ruler. The local chiefs paid tribute to Powhatan, and they received Powhatan’s protection in return. Suc-



cession of political positions was matrilineal, with kinship and inheritance passing through the mother or female line. This was how Powhatan came to his position as paramount chief.

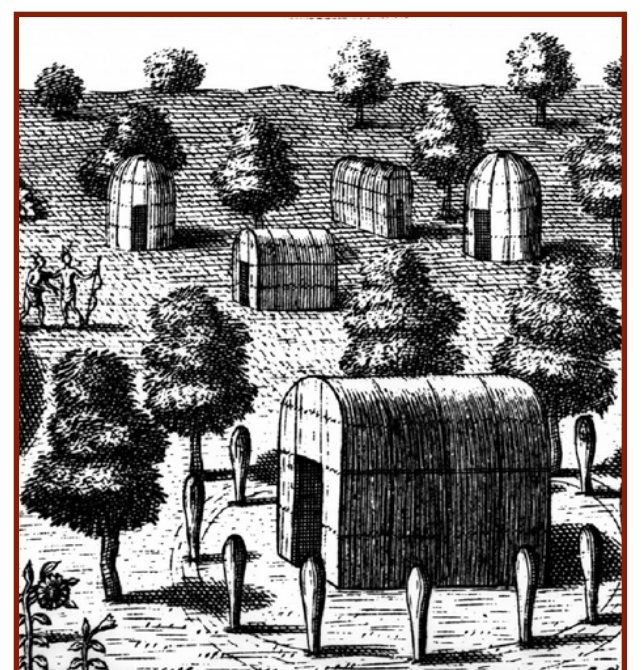
The Powhatan people lived on the high ground overlooking the many waterways, their main form of transportation. A Powhatan house was called a yehakin and was made from natural materials found in the surrounding environment. Its framework was made from saplings of native trees such as red maples, locusts and red cedar. Houses were located near the planting fields. The mixed forests provided an abundance of plant and animal life. The Indians hunted and fished, with fish and shellfish in plentiful supply in the local waters. The soil beneath the forest was rich and appealing to those who wished to farm.



tion of crops possible. The Powhatan lifestyle was heavily dependent upon a seasonal cycle. Their planting, hunting, fishing and gathering followed the rhythm of the seasons. They raised vegetables, such as corn, beans and squash, with corn being the most important. They ate fresh vegetables in the summer and fall, and fish, berries, tuckahoe and stored nuts in the spring. Fishing was a spring and summer activity. When other food resources became low, they could gather oysters and clams. Food was most scarce during late winter through



early spring when the stores of dried corn and beans from fall were nearly gone, and berries had not yet ripened. During the winter season when brush cover was sparse, the Powhatan Indians hunted and ate game. There was a lot of game in the area including raccoon, deer, opossum, turkey, squirrel and rabbit, among others. Some of these, such as the opossum and raccoon, were strange and unfamiliar to the English, so they adopted the Powhatan names for them. Of all the game hunted, deer was the most important because it was used for food, clothing and tools.



Through the centuries, the Powhatan people had learned to understand their environment and to adapt to it in a way which afforded them the necessities of life. In spite of George Percy’s description of the land during the first few days of exploration as a “veritable paradise on earth,” the English found it difficult to interact with the environment in a productive way.

What difficulties were encountered by the settlers during the first year at Jamestown?

The instructions for the colonists had been to locate a site which would be far enough from the coast to avoid being surprised by Spanish warships, a major concern of the Virginia Council. In May 1607, upon selecting the site they named Jamestown in honor of their King, they noted the channel was deep enough to tie their ships to the trees on the shore. This was an important consideration, saving time and effort in loading ships for transport of goods to England. They also felt it could be easily defended against local Indians should they prove hostile.



The Powhatan Indians were wary of the Englishmen from their first sighting. According to John Smith, some of the Indians welcomed them hospitably, offering food and entertainment, while others discharged their arrows and then retreated as the colonists fired their guns.



After building a rudimentary fort and experiencing an Indian attack almost immediately, the settlers realized their vulnerability. On May 26, they set about building a more substantial fortification. This second fort has been described as triangular with a bulwark at each corner containing four or five pieces of ordnance. Two of the bulwarks faced the James River from where any Spanish assault would come and the other one faced inland. According to Company requirements, the settlers constructed three public buildings inside the fort - a church, a storehouse and a guardhouse - set around a market square. Timber-framed houses were also eventually built along the walls to replace the tents in which the colonists had been living.

A week after the building of the second fort, Captain Newport sailed for England and the realities of life in the wilderness set in as colonists experienced a variety of challenges including hunger and disease, each of which took a heavy toll. The colonists were so weakened from sickness it was reported they could hardly stand. George Percy wrote that most died from famine, but the major killer was more likely polluted river water, full of "slime and filth," which led to salt poisoning, dysentery and typhoid. An epidemic swept the settlement and left half the 104 men and boys dead before the end of September. Only about 50 survived as winter approached. The colony was on the brink of collapse. With Captain Newport gone and Captain Gosnold having died, the leadership disintegrated, and the men began quarreling among themselves. It was around this time that the Powhatans, rather than resuming hostilities against the weakened, disease-ridden Englishmen, instead brought food to the fort and saved the colonists' lives.

In January 1608, eight or nine months after leaving Jamestown, Captain Newport returned with new immigrants. They discovered that only 38 of the original settlers had survived and only ten were physically able to work. In addition, the deposed president of the council (Wingfield) was under house arrest, one member of the council had been shot (Kendall), another was about to be hanged (Smith) and other leaders were about to abandon the colony. Though weakened and hungry from the voyage, the new colonists set to work. The fort was once again filled with activity and renewed purpose.

What challenges did the settlers face after their first year at Jamestown?



Challenges continued to plague the settlers. In early January 1608, shortly after Captain Newport's return, a devastating fire destroyed much of the fort, including the colonists' dwellings and provisions. Once again, the colony was dependent upon the Indians for food. Ironically, John Smith became the person most likely to succeed in any personal encounters with the Indians, as he had done during the previous critical months. Smith, along with Newport, became the critical negotiator with Wahunsonacock. It was during these negotiations that thirteen-year old Thomas Savage was presented to the chief who received him as his son. In return, Wahunsonacock gave the English his trusty servant, Namontack. The hope was that these "go-betweens" would come to understand the language and culture of both groups and would be invaluable in future negotiations. Smith and Newport were successful in obtaining enough corn to last through the rest of that winter and early spring.

By summer of 1608, the fort was rebuilt. John Smith reported that the settlers built a blockhouse at the entrance to the island, experimented with glass making and planted 100 acres of corn. Conditions at this new Jamestown seemed to improve when Smith became president in September of 1608. Captain Newport, ever mindful of the economic purpose of the Virginia Company, had sent the early settlers digging for gold ore, but Smith thought it folly to search for gold. Instead, he ordered laborers and gentlemen to plant crops and build shelters. He offered strict leadership, pronouncing, "he that will not worke shall not eate." He trained men in military skills and dealt effectively with the Indians in trade and political negotiations, until his strong-armed tactics angered local tribes. One of his most important contributions was the exploration and mapping of the Chesapeake Bay area. Smith's tenure as president lasted about a year. In October 1609, he was forced to return to England due to a gunpowder injury, and the colony again began to deteriorate.



In mid-August 1609, a fleet with several hundred new settlers arrived in Virginia. Their flagship, *Sea Venture*, carrying acting governor Sir Thomas Gates and other newly appointed colonial leaders, had ship wrecked in Bermuda. The more than 300 colonists, including women and children, arrived tired and hungry. With Smith gone, George Percy had agreed to accept the position as president and was in command during the infamous 'starving time' of 1609-10. Evidence now shows a serious drought had engulfed the area during this time worsening conditions even for the local Indians. Faced with sickness, disease, malnutrition and retaliatory attacks by the Indians, the colony was brought to the brink of extinction.

In May 1610, Sir Thomas Gates belatedly arrived with more than 100 survivors from Bermuda. He found the fort in ruins and remaining 60 colonists there "famished at the point of death." Thirty others at Point Comfort fared much better. Gates established martial law to maintain order, but soon decided to evacuate Jamestown. On June 7, "burying our ordinances before the fort gate which looked into the river," the Jamestown inhabitants sailed down the James River, seeming to bring the colony to a close. Downriver they met an advance party from the incoming supply fleet of the first governor, Lord de la Warr (Thomas West). With a new supply of provisions and settlers, the demoralized colonists turned back, and once again new life was breathed into the Jamestown venture.



Lord de la Warr set about rebuilding the colony. He rebuilt the triangular palisade, with a marketplace, storehouse and chapel occupying the interior. He had new houses erected, framed like traditional "mud and stud" English houses with wide "Country Chimnies." The walls and roofs were covered with fine woven mats and bark, keeping out the rain and hot sun rays. This combination of English and Indian building techniques kept their houses cool during the hot summer months.

In spite of stern discipline and substantial progress at the fort, Lord de la Warr experienced setbacks in his attempts to end the war with the Indians. In addition, he experienced some rebellion among his own men. About a third of the colonists perished, and he fell to illnesses that sapped his ability to lead. At the end of March 1611, Lord de la Warr put George Percy in charge and set sail for England.

What factors led to the survival and growth of Jamestown?



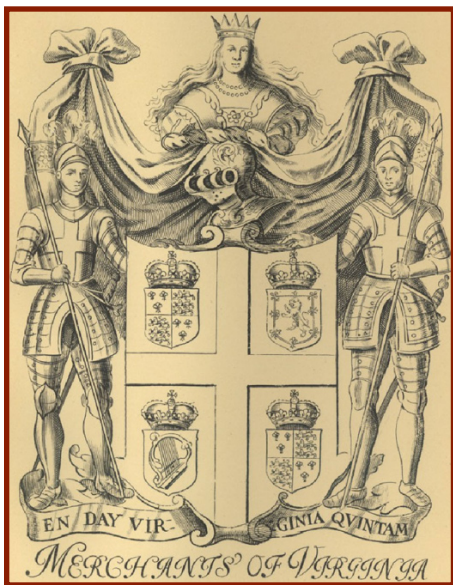
In May 1611, a new lieutenant governor, Sir Thomas Dale, arrived in Virginia with a fleet bearing 300 new settlers and soldiers as well as provisions, supplies, livestock and seeds to grow garden crops. These new supplies and the leadership of Dale seemed to rejuvenate the town. Dale was a military man who was appalled at the conditions he found at Jamestown. Within a month of his arrival, he toughened and expanded the rules laid out by Gates and de la Warr, inflicting harsh punishment upon lawbreakers. Though much criticized in later writings as “cruel and tyrannous,” the Company’s leaders at the time saw Dale’s actions as bringing much-needed order and stability to the colony. Dale built and repaired structures at James Fort and established thriving new settlements up the James River at Henrico and Bermuda Hundred in order to disperse the population.



Company leaders knew that without sufficient fresh recruits and investment, the colony could not long survive. In addition, in spite of some successful trading missions to acquire corn, for the most part the war with the Powhatan Indians continued unabated. Morale among the colonists was reported as being so low that the great majority of settlers would surrender to the Spanish without a shot fired if offered the opportunity to return to England. It is against this backdrop of mixed news that another quite unexpected turn of fortune presented itself.

In the spring of 1613, one of Captain Samuel Argall’s trading expeditions ended with the kidnapping of Pocahontas, Chief Powhatan’s favored daughter who had befriended Captain John Smith in an earlier encounter. After many back and forth negotiations between the English and the Indians, a bargain was made which brought about an end to five years of vicious fighting between the two groups. Both sides could now plant their corn, fish, hunt and live in peace without the continual worry of attack. Over time, Pocahontas learned to speak English, converted to Christianity and took the name of Rebecca. In April 1614, she married John Rolfe, one of the English colonists who had arrived in Virginia after having been shipwrecked with Gates’ fleet in Bermuda. Now with peace established between the two peoples, proper attention could be given to the natural abundance of the land. Despite all of the focus earlier on discovering gold, tobacco would hold the key to Virginia’s success.

What were the economic practices at Jamestown?



From the beginning when the Virginia Company of London was formed, the overseas venture was an economic one. Captain Newport led the efforts of the settlers to discover gold ore even when their efforts might have been better used toward acquiring food. They were not quick to learn how to grow food in their new environment and increasingly had to rely upon the Indians for corn and other crops. In addition, the colonists did not have the tools they needed since they were limited in what they could bring from England. Lumber was a resource that was plentiful in Virginia, and the location of Jamestown along the water where ships could dock should have been ideal for this industry. Yet, lumber turned out to be a very expensive commodity to ship. Wood extractives such as pitch and tar, soapash and potash were more practical but needed processing before shipping. Silk production, glassmaking and wine production were all industries which were attempted with varying degrees of success, yet none to the extent needed to make a profit for the Virginia Company. Within a few years, most of these early attempts, with the exception of lumber products, were abandoned. Settlers continued to barter with the Indians, as they had from the beginning, in order to meet their daily needs. Even the fur trade, which made a small profit for the Company, would not become a very successful venture until after 1630.



The first truly marketable product raised in Virginia was tobacco. By 1612, John Rolfe experimented with planting a new variety of tobacco, a mild Spanish leaf, which he anticipated would be more suited to English tastes than the bitter Indian variety. He not only learned how to raise this new type of plant but also managed to harvest and cure it so it could be transported to England without spoiling. After a couple of years, he met with great success and was busily marketing his crop among English merchants and tobacco sellers when he traveled with his bride, Rebecca, to London in 1616. Ironically, he could not smoke a pipe in the presence of King James I as the king’s vehement opposition to tobacco was well-known at court and had been set out at length in his *A Counter-Blaste to Tobacco* published in 1604, in which he attacked arguments in favor of smoking and derided claims about its medicinal qualities. He called it a “stinking weed,” and “a custom loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs...” Nevertheless, tobacco revolutionized the colony’s economy and became the cash crop of Virginia.

Virginia colonists quickly gave up all other products to meet the demand for tobacco in England. Production increased phenomenally into the 1620s, and became readily available for mass consumption in England. All classes and genders smoked. Virginia became synonymous with tobacco, and Virginians developed a way of life that revolved around its production.



Since tobacco was too bulky to carry very far across land, farmers spread out along the rivers where boats could easily pick up their crops. Tobacco was shipped to England where it was sold to buy goods or to purchase more labor. With profits from tobacco, wealthy Virginia planters could purchase luxury goods from around the world such as Chinese porcelains, Oriental silks, Dutch and German ceramics, Venetian glass, objects of gold, silver, brass and pewter, fancy foodstuffs and stylish household furnishings. Virginia became part of the global economy.

Success with tobacco would not have been possible without the right of individuals to own private property. Both as a means for planters to gain more land and as a way to populate the colony, the Virginia Company developed a new policy of land ownership in 1618. Instead of Company controlled plantations, land began to be allotted to individuals. Settlers who had arrived before 1616 (“ancient planters”) were granted 100 acres of land for their own use. Investors also received 100 acres for every share. The new plantations were called “hundreds” or “particular plantations.” These plantations were allowed some self-government, an added incentive for new investors to risk their capital. Those who arrived after April 1616 and paid their own passage received 50

acres for themselves and another 50 for every person they transported. This arrangement, known as the “headright” system, became the primary means by which laborers were recruited and sent to the colony for the rest of the century. By importing hired workers, successful planters could fulfill their need for labor while amassing additional land. The opportunity to realize substantial profits from growing tobacco while accumulating land sparked the spread of settlement. Without a doubt, this new policy changed the economic life of the colony forever.

The headright system eventually led to a hierarchy of labor as well. Indentured servants signed contracts agreeing to work



a specified number of years in exchange for transportation to Virginia. This contract was signed with an agent who sold the contract to a colonial planter. Those who acquired indentured servants had to provide them with food, clothing and shelter. They could exact labor under certain conditions, using what the law deemed reasonable discipline. When a contract expired, the servant received “freedom dues,” usually three barrels of corn and a suit of clothes. Former servants often leased land until they could acquire some of their own. Tobacco required a lot of labor, however. Eventually, indentured servants could not meet this demand and, over time, slavery developed in Virginia.

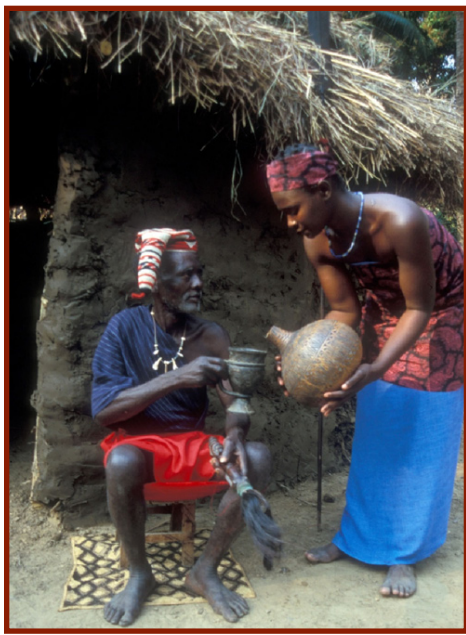
Who were the Africans who came to Jamestown?



In August 1619, a group of West Central Africans arrived in Virginia aboard *White Lion*, a privateer vessel. While raiding in the Caribbean the *White Lion*, along with privateers on another ship, *Treasurer*, had seized part of a cargo of Africans from a Portuguese slave ship named *Sao Jao Bautista* bound from the African city of Luanda to Veracruz, Mexico. A short time later the *White Lion* stopped at Point Comfort, the site of modern-day Hampton, Virginia. Here at least 20 of the captured Africans were sold to officials of the Virginia Company. *Treasurer* arrived shortly thereafter with more Africans.

Who were these Africans? They were most likely Kimbundu-speaking people from the kingdom of Ndongo, a heavily-populated area in West Central Africa, now Angola, which included the royal capital, Kabasa. They were likely captives from the 1618-1620 war when Portugal tried to gain complete control of Angola. These first Africans could have been from an urban area and may have been familiar with European languages, trade items, clothing and customs. They may also have been introduced to Christianity, because the Kingdom of Ndongo began to convert to Christianity around 1490, and Portuguese law required all slaves to be baptized before arriving in America.

There were many similarities in Angolan society with that of Powhatan society. Women were in charge of raising crops, very much like the women in Powhatan society. Angolan men, like Powhatan men, were hunters. Unlike the Powhatan Indians, some Angolan men may also have had experience tending herds of cattle, goats, chickens and guinea fowl. They also produced iron tools and weapons. The Angolans wove cloth from materials such as tree bark and cotton. This cloth was used for decorative purposes, as well as for clothing. Like English and Powhatan fashions, dress was one way that Angolans could communicate status and social role to one another.



Whatever similarities may have been found between the cultures, it mattered little to the Angolans who found themselves in an unfamiliar country, isolated from their families and friends, forced to work in difficult conditions. They brought with them no more than the clothes they wore and their knowledge, skills and customs. They were probably expected to adopt the English manner of dress to suit their roles and, in all likelihood, had their own traditions ignored or discouraged by those around them.

At Point Comfort, these men and women were traded for provisions and became part of the work force at Jamestown. Because tobacco agriculture in Virginia required much labor, the Africans were a useful addition to the colony as they made possible the expansion of the tobacco economy. Though Portuguese slavers had initially taken the Africans from Angola, it is not clear whether they were treated as indentured servants or slaves upon their arrival at Jamestown. Whatever their status, it is clear, according to a Virginia Company report in 1620, that they were not completely free. They were in a condition of forced servitude in which the English extracted their labor and demanded their absolute obedience.



What were the roles of women and children at Jamestown?

Although boys had been among the first settlers on the initial voyage of 1607 and the first women arrived the next year, women and children were few in number until 1620 when approximately 90 single women arrived with the clear intention of bringing a sense of permanence to the colony. Sir Edward Sandys, treasurer of the Virginia Company, stated that, “...the plantation can never flourish till families be planted and the respect of wives and children fix the people on the soil.”

The first women to arrive at Jamestown were Mistress Forrest and her maid, Anne Burras, who arrived in 1608. Anne Burras’ marriage to laborer, John Laydon several months later was the first Jamestown wedding. Living at Kecoughtan, they struggled during the most difficult of times, yet raised four daughters in the new Virginia wilderness.

Temperance Flowerdew, Joane Peirce and her daughter Joane were among the ill-fated 400 to arrive during 1609-10 timeframe just in time for them to experience the infamous “starving time.” All three survived during this time when approximately 75% of Jamestown perished due to sickness and disease. Temperance, who went home to England, later returned as the wife of the new governor, Sir George Yeardley. Joane Peirce, the daughter, eventually became John Rolfe’s third wife following the death of Pocahontas.

Englishmen were very aware of the importance of women and families in the success of Jamestown. In 1619, while receiving grants of land from the Virginia Company as dividends for their time in Virginia, the male settlers also requested allotments of land for their wives, because “...in a new plantation it is not known whether man or woman be the more necessary.” Women were given the status of “ancient planters” and were awarded land, like their male counterparts, if they arrived in Virginia by 1616 and met certain Company criteria.

In 1621, 57 other women arrived at Jamestown. Ranging in age from 16 to 28, they were all daughters of artisans and gentry. It appears these women were not coerced into coming. Instead, they may have looked upon this as an opportunity to start their lives anew in Virginia - where men outnumbered women six to one. Rather than serve the Virginia Company as indentured servants, they probably worked as seamstresses and laundresses. There may have been hundreds of “diverse others” who braved the crossing only to perish in the harsh conditions at Jamestown.

In the fall of 1618, it was reported that the City of London was shipping 100 boys and girls to Virginia. These children were destitute, supported by London parishes, and the relocation seemed an ideal arrangement for all parties concerned. Even though many of the children did not want to go, it was deemed best for them because they were being rescued from the streets and given an opportunity to learn some good crafts or trades. Around 250 destitute children were transported between 1617 and 1623 to the Virginia Colony. Because there is only an occasional reference to children at Jamestown, very little is known about their daily lives.

Since the English transported their customs and traditions with them across the Atlantic, one can assume that children at Jamestown played games similar to those played in England such as jumping rope, running games or playing with yo-yos. Like their adult counterparts, much of their day must have been consumed with work or learning a trade. In England, the education of 17th-century children prepared them for life. For example, girls prepared for marriage and household duties, while boys frequently learned a skill or trade through an apprenticeship.



Several young English boys served the colony as interpreters. Samuel Collier, who arrived with the original settlers in 1607, lived for a time with a local tribe of Virginia Indians under Smith's order to learn their language. Thirteen-year old Thomas Savage and fourteen-year old Henry Spelman also experienced life with the Virginia Indians. Both Thomas and Henry became important interpreters during their time with the tribes and, in the case of Henry Spelman, recorded important observations in his later writings.

Even though in 1620 men continued to outnumber women by about six to one, the role of both women and children should not be minimized. They were a stabilizing force in Virginia and played an indispensable role in the development of Jamestown from a military outpost to its establishment as the first permanent English settlement in North America.



What was the structure of government at Jamestown and how did it evolve?

In the year 1619, a very special event took place in the church at Jamestown - the first representative assembly in America met to write some of the colony's laws. In twelve relatively short years, government at Jamestown had evolved from a small council of seven men to this General Assembly milestone. What happened during these twelve years which accounts for this progression of government?

Before the voyagers set sail from England, under a charter granted by King James I in April 1606, a royal council made up of thirteen members appointed by the king, called the "Councell of Virginia" was established to govern the enterprise. Government in the colony was to be undertaken by a local council which was to carry out the instructions of the Virginia Council in London. Everyone would work for the Virginia Company. In return, the Company would provide all the supplies for the colony. This arrangement was a pragmatic way of uniting national and private interests in creating a common approach to the founding of the colony.

Almost from the beginning of the voyage, there were difficulties. Though Captain Christopher Newport had been given "sole charge and command" of all the persons aboard the three ships which set sail from England in December 1606, the Virginia Council had sealed the names of the colony's leaders in a box and expressly commanded that it was not to be opened until they reached their destination. This created a measure of uncertainty in the men's minds about who would be in charge in Virginia. Even after the leaders were determined shortly after sighting landfall in April 1607, it did not take long after Captain Newport's departure from the settlement in June for quarreling among the men to resume and a crisis of leadership to set in. This continued off and on until September 1608, when Captain John Smith, as the only surviving member of the original council who had not yet served, assumed the presidency and, through his strong leadership, was credited with saving the colony as it was on the brink of collapse.

It became clear in London that there were problems with the government in Jamestown and that a change was in order. A new charter was created in May 1609. This charter included a new corporation which was headed by a treasurer, as the principal officer, and a governing council that served as the permanent administrative body of the Company and was directly answerable to it by way of weekly and quarterly meetings. A new Virginia Council was also created, made up of men nominated by the Company rather than by the King and his ministers. In addition, a new position of "governour" was given extensive powers including the right to enforce martial law, if necessary.

The first man to hold this position was Sir Thomas West, Lord de la Warr, with Sir Thomas Gates as lieutenant governor. It was left to Gates to establish a strict code of laws upon his arrival in May 1610, which were later expanded under Lord de la Warr. These were derived from the instructions delivered to Lord de la Warr by the Virginia Council shortly before he left England in 1610. These became known as "Laws Divine, Morall and Martiall." They included duties and obligations of settlers as well as penalties for transgressions. Among other things, officers were required to ensure that all those under their command attended divine service twice daily, in the morning and evening, and to punish anyone who blasphemed "God's holy name" or challenged the authority of a preacher or minister. There was to be one church, one God, and one law. No dissension would be tolerated. Sir Thomas Dale built upon this strict enforcement of law with the official establishment of martial law when he arrived in March 1611.



The next big reform in governance occurred with "the greate Charter", a set of instructions issued by the Virginia Company in 1618, which contained provisions designed to encourage private investment and immigration. Because the Company was concerned that the colony's severe martial code would discourage this from occurring, it instructed the governor-elect, Sir George Yeardley, to introduce "just laws for the happy guiding and governing of the people." Two new councils were created: a council of state, whose members were selected by the Virginia Company of London, to assist the governor in his duties, and a "generall Assemblie" that included the Council and two "Burgesses" from every town, hundred, and

particular plantation, "Chosen by the [free] inhabitants." This new political structure reduced the power of the governor, who previously had been appointed for life and who had the option to appoint or replace members of the council at will. Under the new rules, Council decisions were made by majority vote, with the governor only casting the deciding vote in the case of a tie. The General Assembly was to be the voice of the people of Virginia, providing a check on the power of the governor and council. Members of Virginia's first legislative assembly gathered at Jamestown's church on July 30, 1619. Thus began the first representative government in the European colonies.

Before adjourning on August 4, the assembly passed laws against gambling, drunkenness, idleness, "excess in apparel", theft and murder. They regulated trade with the Indians and limited the number of Indians allowed to work and live within the settlements. Other laws were adopted requiring that households keep a year's supply of corn on hand and plant vineyards and mulberry trees to raise silkworms. Regulations were established for preparing tobacco for market. Limits on how far settlers could venture from home (not beyond 20 miles) and how long they could undertake a voyage without permission (none longer than seven days) were also established. A judicial system similar to English law replaced the harsh administration of martial law. The close link between church and state continued, including a series of requirements for ministers.

Even though this assembly in 1619 was a turning point in the governing structure of Jamestown, it did not end the economic difficulties brought on by a series of events, including Indian attacks, disputes among factions and bad investments. In 1624, King James I dissolved the Virginia Company's charter and, seventeen years after the arrival at Jamestown, established royal control of the colony. However, the first meeting of the General Assembly in 1619 set a pattern for political life in Virginia that endured after 1624 with the abolishment of the Company. The idea of a system of checks and balances was later embodied in the United States Constitution, and the present Virginia General Assembly continues the tradition established by the first twenty Virginia burgesses that hot summer day in 1619.



How did the Virginia colony grow during the 17th century?



During the Virginia Company period (1606-1624) English settlements in Virginia focused on lands along the lower James River. A small number of colonists also established themselves on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. After Virginia became a royal colony in 1624, the limits of English settlement at first expanded very slowly. The war with the Powhatan Indians that began with an uprising in 1622 put frontier communities at risk. Colonial authorities preferred to strengthen existing settlements rather than create new ones.

Once peace with the Indians came again in 1632, the English rapidly began to establish new plantations. Colonists moved northward, claiming land between the James and York Rivers, and then towards the Rappahannock and Potomac Rivers as well. This expansion triggered another war with the Indians. The 1644-1646 Anglo-Powhatan war ended with the defeat of the Indians, opening up most of Tidewater Virginia to English settlement. Settlement then progressed west to just beyond the fall line.

After their defeat, the Indian tribes of the coastal plain region accepted the domination of the English, and their chiefs ruled under the authority of the English royal governor. A series of small reservations were set aside by the English authorities for the various Powhatan tribes, but colonists paid little heed, encroaching on these lands as they moved farther north and west. Laws of this period reflected the strained relations between Indians and colonists. A 1656 law required Indians to carry a pass when they hunted, fished or foraged within specified areas. A 1662 law made them wear silver or copper badges, inscribed with their tribe's name when they entered these areas. Special markets for Indian trade were established, although some trading probably occurred at Jamestown when the Indians came to pay their annual tribute to the English. In the 1677 Treaty of Middle Plantation the Indians acknowledged they were subjects of the King of England.

As English settlement moved west and north, colonists encountered Indian tribes who had never been part of the Powhatan paramount chiefdom. These non-Powhatan groups often resisted English expansion, sparking a new series of conflicts on the frontier. In the late 17th century the Virginia English came into contact with the Iroquois Confederacy, five very large and powerful tribes based in Pennsylvania and New York. Colonists living on the frontier thought the Virginia government did too little to protect them from Indian attacks, and sometimes carried out unauthorized and unjustified attacks in retaliation against Virginia Indians. Virginia's governor, Sir William Berkeley, did little to protect the farmers on the frontier.

In 1676, Nathaniel Bacon formed his own small unofficial militia. This militia mistakenly killed some friendly Indians, sparking native retaliation and Governor Berkeley's anger. Conflict developed between Bacon, poor whites and discontented servants and slaves on the one hand, and Berkeley and the wealthy landowners on the other. Bacon's group wanted to drive all the Indians from the colony. Berkeley wanted to preserve the important fur trade with some Indian groups, and he blamed Bacon for causing trouble. Bacon's rebellion had begun.

In September 1676, the two men and their armies fought at Jamestown over who would control the government. Rather than give up, Bacon and his men set fire to the town. Bacon soon died, and Berkeley returned to power. The fire destroyed an estimated 16 to 18 houses, along with the church and the statehouse.

Virginia's English population grew dramatically during the later half of the 17th century, but the rural nature of Virginia's society remained unchanged. Several royally appointed governors tried to develop towns, and laws passed in 1680 and again in 1691 officially created over twenty towns in Virginia. Most of these towns were failures. Two that did flourish as important ports were Yorktown and Norfolk. Except for Jamestown, Yorktown and Norfolk, the vast majority of people in Virginia continued to live on scattered plantations and farms.

What factors contributed to the move of the capital of the colony from Jamestown to Williamsburg?

As late as 1691, King William III and Queen Mary II sent word that Jamestown would remain the seat of government in Virginia. However, when Lt. Governor Francis Nicholson arrived in Virginia, he inspected the colony's military defenses and found them lacking. In 1698, the statehouse at Jamestown was once again destroyed by fire. Students from the College of William and Mary, established ten miles inland at Middle Plantation in 1693, urged the General Assembly to move the capital there. The assembly agreed, and in 1699 Virginia's government followed colonial settlement inland. The new capital city would be known as Williamsburg.

By 1699, the population of Virginia had grown from the 104 colonists of 1607 to more than 60,000 people, most of them living east of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Only about 600 Powhatan Indians remained on reservations located in the English-controlled parts of the colony. By 1699, Virginia's Africans had increased in number to about 6,000, or 10% of the population.

Jamestown declined rapidly after the capital moved to Williamsburg. By 1716, the town consisted of "a church, a Court House...and three or four brick houses." Eventually, Jamestown ceased to be a town at all, and the town lands became agricultural fields. Yet, the colony was strong and growing. Jamestown had become Virginia.

At Jamestown cultures from three continents came together, worked alongside each other, and fought one another before a new way of life ultimately emerged. The process was long and harsh with displacement of Indian populations and the institution of slavery creating dire consequences for our nation. It was from these encounters and struggles that a new nation was shaped with cultural diversity one of its defining characteristics. It was at Jamestown that free enterprise and private ownership of property were introduced and offered opportunities for social and economic mobility. In 1619 the first steps were taken toward representative government, laying the foundation for our United States Constitution. After 400 years, the history of Jamestown, with all of its struggles and tragedies, reminds us that we can better understand the present by learning from the past.

Historical background materials made possible by Archibald Andrews Marks.

