

**Jamestown:
Who Went and Why it Faltered**

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The sixteenth century found England struggling for her economic independence from her rivals, Spain, Portugal and France, while the New World gleamed on the horizon as the avenue toward her goal.¹ The climate of this new continent produced an American land rich with fertile soil, valuable pitch and thousands of miles of virgin forests. More importantly, the American soil contained gold, tons upon tons of gold, or so it was imagined. In its crude stage during the late sixteenth century, America was nearly ready to aid in the assemblage of the most powerful mercantile empire ever to exist, missing only one key ingredient, Englishmen. But how could the Royal English Government manage to persuade its people to uproot themselves and settle in America? What in the world could entice a man to leave his home, family, and the civilized world in which he dwelled, to undertake a treacherous transatlantic voyage only to live in a world completely devoid of any near facsimile to civilization as known in those times?

This question faced the reigns of both Queen Elizabeth I and King James I, since during the Elizabethan era it had become a settled governmental policy that England was to colonize North America.² The Government understood that there had to be a strong migratory desire amongst the people in order to effectively colonize; the English people had to be convinced that there was much to gain by resettling in America. Granted, it did not take a genius to figure this out, but it did take some genius in implementation. Promoters of colonization, such as Richard Hakluyt and Sir Walter Ralieggh were hired by the government to capture the imagination of the people with tales of gold, heathen natives in need of conversion to christianity, vast amounts of fertile land, and scores of adventures to be had.

Finally in 1585, Sir Walter Raleigh was able to assemble a group of men and attempted to colonize an area of the New World known as Virginia.³ Before this first experiment in permanent colonization could be effectively tested, England was at war with

¹ Wright, Louis B. The Dream of Prosperity in Colonial America. p. 39

² Sams, Conway White. The Conquest of Virginia: The Second Attempt. p. 69

³ At that time, the land called Virginia stretched from as far south as what is today North Carolina, to as far north as Massachusetts.

Spain. The settlers were abandoned and subsequently disappeared, ending this first experiment in what appeared to be total failure. In actuality this was not a failure at all, because it was for the squatter's right to colonize North America that England had successfully warred with Spain.⁴ The defeat of the mighty Spanish Armada was England's green light for colonization and from that point it was straight back to the drawing board.

The fact that the English had fought Spain with the intention of acquiring territory in the New World lead some to believe that the settlement at Jamestown was a military tactic. Conway Sams, the author of The Conquest of Virginia: The Second Attempt, stated that Jamestown was a "military expedition" established for the purpose of carrying on the war against Spain.⁵ According to Sams, Jamestown was designed to be an English base for piratical excursions upon Spanish shipping. He bases his argument on three points, that there were no women sent to Jamestown in 1607, that the Spanish Ambassador to England at that time had suspected piratical intent, and lastly that the nobles who arrived in Jamestown in 1607 were veterans of the war with Spain. This idea that the sole purpose for the settlement was to be a pirate's base is much too narrow, and can easily be contested. First of all, women could have been excluded from the first shipment for several economic possibilities; they would have been a diversion to the men whose duty it was to seek and mine gold; they would not have been strong enough to mine themselves; or, they were to be brought over after a profit had been turned so that there would have been reason for them to stay, namely to aid in the production of new miners.

Secondly, Sams based his charge of intent to commit piracy on an assumption made by the Spanish Ambassador, making no mention of any English statement or written word outlining Jamestown as a pirate's port. In fact, when the settlers were given their instructions as to where they should settle, they were advised to choose a place well inland to avoid being attacked by the Spanish.

Thirdly, Sams wrote that the nobles who arrived in Jamestown in 1607 "were probably all veterans of the war with Spain, and fully appreciated the fact that in founding

⁴ Rowse, A.L. The Elizabethans and America.

⁵ Sams, p. 74.

Virginia they were carrying on the same struggling against her."⁶ Not only is his use of the word probably troubling, but with one exception, none of the other historians researched, suggested that there were any colonists who were veterans of the war with Spain. The only exception being Marcus Hansen in his book The Transatlantic Migration. Hansen did account for a portion of the settlers as veterans, but noted that they were military deserters. Had Jamestown been a military expedition, then why would anyone who would have recently run away from the military, turn around and reenlist for a military venture?

Lastly, if Jamestown was indeed a military expedition, one would expect that active representatives from England's armed forces would have been present and that the colony would have been under strict governmental control. But this was not the case, the company, while being accepted and encouraged by the government, was privately owned and privately operated; making money, not a fortification, was the true order of the day.⁷

A. L. Rowse, in his book The Elizabethans and America, makes an important statement about the role of the English government in the settlement of Jamestown, "Though government rightly rejected the idea of a State enterprise - the money was to be raised by a public joint stock and the public was to take its chance - nevertheless the venture was given official backing from the first."⁸ As the smoke clears, a clear picture now comes to focus, and what is seen is none other than the familiar face of capitalism. First there was the English governmental desire for economic independence, to which American colonization was recognized as the solution; the Government then endorsed the men promoting colonization, who promised would-be settlers wealth and adventure. Then, when it came time to foot the bill, the Government took advantage of its capitalistic system of free enterprise and passed the buck onto its public of investors, while retaining the decision-making power over the colony by reserving the right to appoint the leaders of the company as a stipulation in the company's charter. In this way, failure would be

⁶ Sams, p. 73.

⁷ Notestein, Wallace. The English People on the Eve of Colonization. p. 257.

⁸ Rowse p. 64.

nearly impossible for the investors, who of course would not let the project and their savings flutter away, and secondly, failure would not even be a concern to the Government because it really had nothing to lose monetarily. Thus, America was constructed upon the cornerstone of capitalism.

As for the motives of the Virginia Company in colonization, there is no question to the fact that their aim was the rapid acquisition of wealth. Sir Thomas Smith was the first treasurer of the company, coming directly from the governorship of the East India Trading Corporation. He brought with him the policy of immediate gain, sacrificing all for instantaneous profit, that had made the East India Corporation a success, but proved to be a detriment to the life of the infant Virginia Company. He went so far as to allow restrictions to be placed on the settler's planting of food so as not to interfere with the excavation of riches and the search for the passage to the South Seas.⁹ Of course, other more noble motives have been attached to the company. Conway Sams, for example, lists such motives as the extension of Christianity to the Indians, and by the plantation of a colony, relieving the congested population of England.¹⁰ Even the Company itself proclaimed that the "principal object of the plantation was the spread of the true religion, the conversion of the savages to christianity, and the first plantation of the Reformed Religion."¹¹ It may very well have been that the company did believe that these were their purposes, or that was what they wanted their prospective settlers to believe, but in an examination of the evidence, it is clear that these could have only been secondary motives at best.

First, in regards to the relief from congestion which the colony would provide, the question must be asked, "What congestion?" By 1600 the poor vagabond as a populous problem in English society had disappeared, due to the creation of jobs brought on by the country's move to wool production and by the reforms of the Elizabethan Poor Laws.

⁹ Ballagh, James Curtis. White Servitude in the Colony of Virginia. p.14 The South Seas referred to the Pacific Ocean.

¹⁰ Sams, p. 79.

¹¹ Sams, p. 79-80.

Besides, when overpopulation had been a problem in the sixteenth century, relocation to Ireland had been attempted and ended in miserable failure as those who were relocated flocked back home.¹² There would have been no reason for this technique to have been applied again so soon after the Ireland failure, even if there was an overpopulation problem.

Secondly, if there was such a deep interest in the spread of the true religion and the plantation of the Reformed Religion, then why was there only one religious representative among the first group of English settlers in 1607?¹³ Who would replace him if he would have died, or did they expect to have no deaths? Of course they expected death, they knew exactly what to expect, the transatlantic crossings had been going on for over a century, and surviving the voyage was an amazing feat in and of itself. They also knew of the diseases and "savages" that they would have to deal with, but still they only sent one clergyman on this most important religious mission. Also, concerning their expressed desire to convert the Indians, it seems that in those early years of settlement more Indians were brutalized than baptized.¹⁴

The true motive of the Virginia Company can be seen in the types of people whom it sought to man the expedition. They attempted to assemble a variety of craftsman and miners in order to extract and refine the treasures of the land.¹⁵ As late as 1620, still not a single husbandman or yeoman had been shipped to the starving colony, because first of all, no farmer in England at that time wanted to give up his family and his farm to come to America and die.¹⁶ John Smith remarked that there were few men eager to leave the security of their families and homes, "it cost many a forgotten pound to hire men to go."¹⁷

¹² Hansen, Marcus Lee. The Transatlantic Migration. p. 27.

¹³ Mapp, Alfred J. Jr. The Virginia Experiment. p. 7.

¹⁴ Morgan, Edmund S. American Slavery: American Freedom. p.79.

¹⁵ Hansen, p. 28-29.

¹⁶ Morgan, p. 87.

¹⁷ Hansen, p. 28-29.

Secondly the company, especially under Treasurer Thomas Smith, was more interested in harvesting yellow gold rather than yellow corn. This was a money-making operation with no need for such non-productives as women, soldiers, clergymen, unskilled vagabonds or farmers.

Gathering the right group of people to man the expedition did not come so easily, and it did "cost many a forgotten pound to hire men to go." However, the company did manage to produce one-hundred and five men to make the journey, including between thirty-six to forty eight nobles, four carpenters, and one of each of the following: a clergyman, barber, blacksmith, bricklayer, mason, sailor, tailor and a drummer. The remainder of the group was composed of the noble's personal attendants and a few vagabonds taken from London to be indentured servants.¹⁸

Conway Sams asks, "What were the motives, we may ask, that led these men, with the fate of Raleigh's colonists before them, to leave their homes and risk their lives in such an undertaking?", to which he answered, patriotism and relief from crowded conditions.¹⁹ Patriotism as a motive cannot be weighed very heavily because it was drawn from the questionable theory that nearly all of the nobles of the colony had been veterans of the war with Spain who were continuing that struggle against her. Justifying relief from crowded conditions as a motive is also difficult because by the beginning of the seventeenth century, overpopulation in England was no longer a problem, the problem was unequal distribution of wealth.²⁰

For this reason, most of the men who made the early voyages to Jamestown did so with

¹⁸ Mapp, p. 7; Morgan, p. 84. There is a conflict between Mapp and Morgan as to the number of nobles included in the first shipment of colonists. Morgan accounts for thirty-six while Mapp finds as many as forty-eight. They also disagree on the relationship between the proportion of nobles to commoners in Jamestown as opposed to England. Mapp, while attributing nearly half of the colony's population to nobles, wrote that the group was fairly representative of English urban society. On the other hand, accounting for only thirty-six nobles, Morgan remarks that there were six times as many nobles in Jamestown than there were in England. This disagreement leads to another disagreement between the two concerning the cause of the terrible starving winter of 1609-10.

¹⁹ Sams, p. 79.

²⁰ Andrews, Charles M. The Colonial Period of American History. p. 61.

dreams of making their fortunes in America, returning home to England and enjoying the fruits of their labor.²¹ This "get rich quick" attitude, shared by the government, the company, and the colonists alike led to immediate disaster in Jamestown.

The one-hundred five settlers arrived in Jamestown during the early summer of 1607, after the planting season had already passed. They erected crude living quarters and attempted to live off the land and the small amount of provisions they had carried with them, waiting for the next shipment of settlers and provisions to arrive in 1608. During this time they began searching for iron ore, gold and other precious metals, as well as a passage to the South Seas. By the winter of 1609-10 three more shipments of settlers had arrived, raising Jamestown's population to over five-hundred.²² Two full planting seasons had passed but the colony was literally starving to death. Edmund Morgan best described the situation:

"The settlers have fallen into an uneasy truce with the Indians, punctuated by guerilla raids on both sides, but they have had plenty of time in which they could have grown crops. They have obtained corn from the indians and supplies from England. They have firearms. Game abounds in the woods; and Virginia's rivers are filled with sturgeon in the summer and covered with geese and ducks in the winter. There are five hundred people in the colony now. And they are starving. They scour the woods listlessly for nuts, roots, and berries. And they offer the only authentic examples of cannibalism witnessed in Virginia. One provident man chops up his wife and salts down the pieces. Others dig up graves to eat the corpses. By spring there are only sixty left alive."²³

Indian attacks and swamp diseases accounted for a small number of these deaths, but most were due to slothfulness and ignorance in the search for gold on the part of the colonists, and the ineptitude of the company who had failed to adequately supply them. Quite simply, for whatever reason, the Englishmen had failed to provide for themselves and continued to do so for a period of ten years, bringing themselves face to face with

²¹ Hansen, p. 29.

²² Morgan, p. 84.

²³ Morgan, p. 73.

total extermination time and time again.

There are many explanations for the cause of the early failure of Jamestown, but at the root of them all was the desire for quick profit on the part of all who were involved. One cause can be seen in the poor organization and direction of the colony, which was governed by a Royal Council, and an elected President in the person of Edward Wingfield. Wingfield was a Roman Catholic and therefore never trusted by the Anglican colonists and shareholders. The council members and the colonists constantly suspected him of having pro-Spanish sympathies and attempting to run the colony into the ground, although there is no evidence to substantiate any insubordination.²⁴ Within the council, administrative agreements could seldomly be reached, the members spent most of their time bickering amongst themselves and with the one man who had the experience and the ability to effectively lead the colony, John Smith. Smith had organized the men and had forced them to work hard enough to survive, and because of his leadership only eight men died in the winter of 1608-9.²⁵

By the Spring of 1609, the council members had grown weary of Smith's overbearing ways with the settlers and the Indians. They thought that a couple hours of sustenance work a day took too much time away from important money-making work, and that the Indians would work for the colony if Smith would just stop killing them. The company had intended to gently incorporate the Indians into English society. If treated peacefully, the company believed that the Indians could be easily coaxed to enter their society via their "true religion", culture and technology. After being engulfed into the colonial society, they would make an excellent labor force as well as a market for English goods.²⁶ Smith agreed with this philosophy whole heartedly, except for the part about treating them "peacefully". He felt beating them into submission would be more effective, quicker, and probably would add a little more to the promised adventure of the expedition.

Perhaps the widest rift between Smith and the council members was his overbearing

²⁴ Rowse, p. 68.

²⁵ Morgan, p. 75-78.

²⁶ Morgan, p. 78.

ways with the council members themselves. After all, they were appointed by the king to govern the colony, why should they have had to work to feed themselves when there were plenty of other people to do that for them? This reason alone was enough for them to want to get rid of Smith. Accordingly, the council members petitioned King James for a new charter to affect a change in leadership. James obliged and provided for a company appointed governor to rule the colony with absolute power. Lord De La War was chosen to fill the vacancy and he left for Jamestown in the summer of 1609, but did not reach the colony until the following spring due to being shipwrecked in Bermuda. This ungoverned period, characterized by desperate want for any fashion of leadership, resulted in the first great starving time, the Jamestown fiasco.

Another explanation for the fiasco was the collectivization of labor practiced in the early years. The colonists were expected to work together as a community for their own sustenance and to produce profitable exports. The shareholders in the company, back in England, collected these profits while the colonists collected nothing but a growing hatred of the company. Thus they had no incentive. At home they were used to the capitalistic free enterprise system, in which one received a day's wages for a day's work. In Jamestown, there was no reason for the colonist to work hard because it seemed to him that the lazy man received just as much as the industrious man. Perhaps if the principles of capitalism used to form the Virginia Company and create the Jamestown colony had been implemented to its colonists, there might not have been a starving time and the company might have yielded greater profits. In fact, in 1616, the system of collectivized labor was scrapped for the free enterprise system and according to John Rolfe, the switch turned the food deficit into a surplus. However, again due to poor direction, the colonists were buying corn from the Indians once more, later that year.²⁷ This was to be expected because still to that time, not a single farmer had been imported to the colony! Had capitalism been given full reign, and direction been at the very least good, and the colonists been sent a farmer or two, the tragic fiasco might not have occurred.

A third explanation can be found in the nature of the colonists themselves. In the early years of Jamestown, there existed a disproportionate number of nobles, who had

²⁷ Rowse, p. 73.

never done a day's work in their lives. This is part of Edmund Morgan's theory, in his book American Slavery: American Freedom, that the Jamestown fiasco was produced in part by the extraordinary number of nobles, "These numbers gave Virginia's population about six times as large a proportion of gentlemen as England had". Alfred Mapp in his book The Virginia Experiment disagreed, he saw the population as "fairly representative of English urban society", and cited disease and Indian attacks as the cause of disaster.

The Virginian's offered their own explanation:

"The occasion of these miseries was only our own, for want of providence, industry and government, and not the barrenness and defect of the country, as is generally supposed; for, 'til then in three years, for the numbers were landed us, we had never landed sufficient provision for six months... Though we did live, as is said, three years off what this good country naturally affordith; yet now, had we been in Paradise itself, with those governors, it would not have been much better with us."²⁸

The main reason for the initial failure of the Jamestown colony was that it was not planned to be a colony. Its purpose was not to settle North America, but to mine it for gold and other profitable materials to strengthen England. Had it been like any other mine, where the miners could work a twelve to fourteen hour day, collect their wage, go home to their wives and eat a hardy meal, the disaster might not have been so tragic. But in this case, the miners were not only expected to work the mine, but to live in it as well! Still, an even greater problem than this, was that the mine, which the government and the company pressured the colonists to operate, was virtually empty of the materials demanded. England's demands of the colony were a direct reflection of her desire to "get rich quick", and not on the actual potential of the Virginian land. All of this added up to the perfect formula for disaster.

²⁸ Sams, p. 83.

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²⁸ Sams, p. 83.

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