

## VIRGINIAN BEGINNINGS



*Replicas of the ships that carried the first settlers to Jamestown in 1617.*

All through the night the storm blew the three small ships northwards. For hours the frightened sailors struggled with wet ropes and snapping canvas sails. At last, as dawn colored the eastern skies, the storm came to an end. Men dropped to the decks, exhausted. Some fell asleep. Excited shouts awoke them. "Land! Land!" The sailors rushed to the sides of the ships. There, at last, was the land for which they had been searching – Virginia. It was the morning of April 26 in the year 1607.

A few weeks later, on May 20, the sailors tied their ships to trees on the banks of a broad and deep river. They named the river the James, in honor of James I, king of England, the country from which they had set sail five long months before. Just over a hundred men went ashore. On the swampy banks they began cutting down bushes and trees and building rough shelters for themselves. By the end of the year two out of every three of them were dead. But their little group of huts became the first lasting English settlement in America. They named it Jamestown.

The early years of the Jamestown settlement were hard ones. This was partly the fault of the settlers themselves. The site they had chosen was low-lying and malarial. And although their English homeland was many miles away across a dangerous ocean, they failed to grow enough food to feed themselves. They were too busy dreaming of gold.

The settlers had been sent to Jamestown by a group of rich London investors. These investors had formed the Virginia Company. The Company's purpose was to set up colonies along the Atlantic coast of North America, between 34° and 38° north latitude. It was a joint stock company – that is, the investors paid the costs of its expeditions and in return were given the right to divide up any profits it made. The Jamestown settlers were employees of the Virginia Company. The Company's directors hoped that the settlers would find pearls, silver, or some other valuable product in Virginia and so bring them a quick profit on their investment. Most of all, they hoped that the colonists would find gold, as the Spanish conquistadores had done in Mexico.

The colonists eagerly obeyed the Company's orders to search for gold. By doing so they hoped to become rich themselves. There was "no talk, no hope nor work, but dig gold, wash gold, load gold", wrote one of their leaders, Captain John Smith.

And then the colonists began to die—in ones, in twos, finally in dozens. Some died in Amerindian attacks, some of diseases, some of starvation. By April 1608, out of a total of 197 Englishmen who had landed in Virginia only fifty-three were still alive. "Our men were destroyed by cruel diseases," wrote a colonist who survived, "swellings, fluxes, burning fevers and by wars. But most died of famine. There were never Englishmen left in a foreign country in such misery as we were in Virginia."

Jamestown reached its lowest point in the winter of 1609–1610. Of the 500 colonists living in the settlement in October 1609, only sixty were still alive in March 1610. This was "the starving time." Stories reached England about settlers who were so desperate for food that they dug up and ate the body of an Amerindian they had killed during an attack.

Yet new settlers continued to arrive. The Virginia Company gathered homeless children from the streets of London and sent them out to the colony. Then it sent a hundred convicts from London's prisons. Such emigrants were often unwilling to go. The Spanish ambassador in London told of three condemned criminals who were given the choice of being hanged or sent to Virginia. Two agreed to go, but the third chose to hang.

Some Virginia emigrants sailed willingly, however. For many English people these early years of the seventeenth century were a time of hunger and suffering. Incomes were low, but the prices of food and clothing climbed higher every year. Many people were without work. And if the crops failed, they starved. Some English people decided that it was worth risking the possibility of hardships in Virginia to escape from the certainty of them at home. For Virginia had one great attraction that England lacked: plentiful land. This seemed more important than the reports of disease, starvation and cannibalism there. In England, as in Europe generally, the land was owned by the rich. In Virginia a poor man could hope for a farm of his own to feed his family.

## The captain and the princess

Captain John Smith was the most able of the original Jamestown settlers. An energetic 27-year-old soldier and explorer, he had already had a life full of action when he landed there in 1607. It was he who organized the first Jamestown colonists and forced them to work. If he had not done that, the infant settlement would probably have collapsed.

When food supplies ran out Smith set off into the forests to buy corn from the Amerindians. On one of these expeditions he was taken prisoner. According to a story that he told later (which not everyone believed), the Amerindians were going to beat his brains out when Pocahontas, the twelve-year-old daughter of the chief, Powhatan, saved his life by shielding his body with her own. Pocahontas went on to play an important part in Virginia's survival, bringing food to the starving settlers. "She, next under God," wrote Smith, "was the instrument to preserve this colony from death, famine and utter confusion."

In 1609 Smith was badly injured in a gunpowder explosion and was sent back to England. Five years later, in 1614, Pocahontas married the tobacco planter John Rolfe. In 1616 she travelled to England with him and was presented at court to King James I. It was there that the portrait you see here was painted. Pocahontas died of smallpox in 1617 while waiting to board a ship to carry her back to Virginia with her newborn son. When the son grew up he returned to Virginia. Many Virginians today claim to be descended from him and so from Pocahontas.

*A portrait of Pocahontas, painted during her visit to London.*



## Brides for sale

Very few women settled in early Virginia, so in 1619 the Virginia Company shipped over a group of ninety young women as wives for its settlers. To obtain a bride the would-be husbands had to pay the Company "120 pounds weight of best tobacco leaf." The price must have seemed reasonable, for within a very short time all the young women were married.

For a number of years after 1611, military governors ran Virginia like a prison camp. They enforced strict rules to make sure that work was done. But it was not discipline that saved Virginia. It was a plant that grew like a weed there: tobacco. Earlier visitors to America, like Sir Walter Raleigh, had brought the first dried leaves of tobacco to England. Its popularity had been growing ever since, for smoking, for taking as snuff, even for brewing into a drink. In Virginia a young settler named John Rolfe discovered how to dry, or "cure," the leaves in a new way, to make them milder. In 1613 Rolfe shipped the first load of Virginia tobacco to England. London merchants paid high prices because of its high quality.

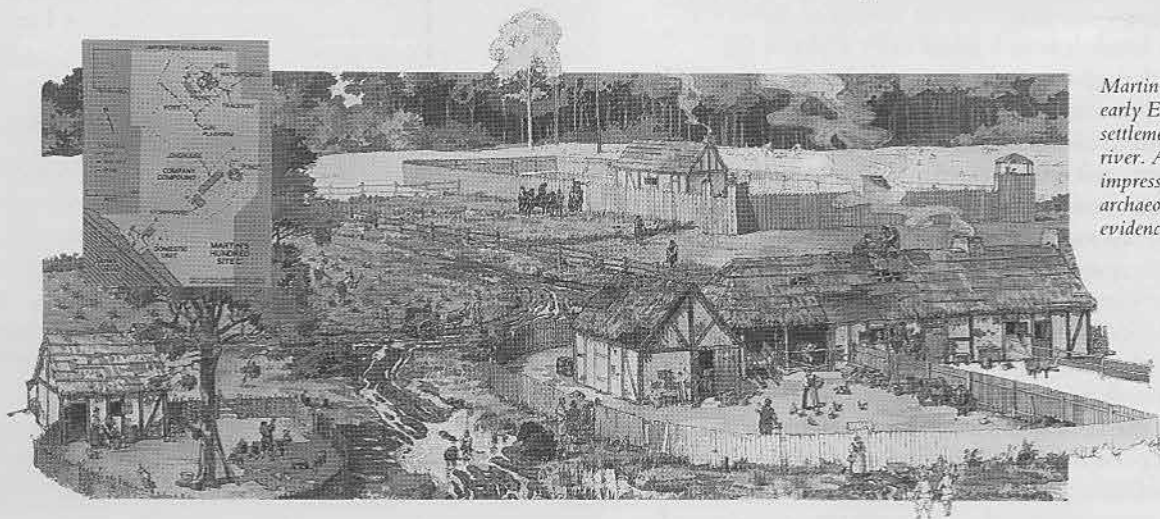
Soon most of the Virginia settlers were busy growing tobacco. They cleared new land along the rivers and ploughed up the streets of Jamestown itself to plant more. They even used it as money. The price of a good horse in Virginia, for example, was sixteen pounds of top quality tobacco. The possibility of becoming rich by growing tobacco brought wealthy



*A label from Wills tobacco. Wills was one of the most famous English tobacco companies.*

men to Virginia. They obtained large stretches of land and brought workers from England to clear trees and plant tobacco. Soon the houses and barns of their estates, or "plantations," could be seen through the trees along the banks of the James river.

Most of the workers on these early plantations were "indentured servants" from England. They promised to work for an employer for an agreed number of years—about seven was average—in exchange for food and clothes. At the end they became free to work for themselves. Luckier ones were given a small piece of land to start a farm of their own—if they were still alive. Life in Virginia



*Martin's Hundred, an early English settlement on the James river. A modern artist's impression, based on archaeological evidence.*

continued to be hard. "I have eaten more in a day at home than I have here for a week," wrote a young man named Richard Frethorne in a letter to his parents back in England.

The same was true for many in Virginia. Nor was hunger the only problem. Diseases like malaria and wars against the Amerindians continued to kill hundreds of settlers. Between 1619 and 1621 about 3,560 people left England to settle in Virginia. Before those years were over, 3,000 of them were dead.

But the survivors stayed. In 1619 there was an important change in the way they were governed.

Virginia's affairs had been controlled so far by governors sent over by the Virginia Company. Now the Company allowed a body called the House of Burgesses to be set up. The burgesses were elected representatives from the various small settlements along Virginia's rivers. They met to advise the governor on the laws the colony needed. Though few realized it at the time, the Virginia House of Burgesses was the start of an important tradition in American life—that people should have a say in decisions about matters that concern them.

The House of Burgesses met for the first time in August 1619. In that same month Virginia saw another important beginning. A small Dutch warship anchored at Jamestown. On board were twenty captured black Africans. The ship's captain sold them to the settlers as indentured servants.

The blacks were set to work in the tobacco fields with white indentured servants from England. But there was a very serious difference between their position and that of the whites working beside them. White servants were indentured for a fixed number of years. Their masters might treat them badly, but they knew that one day they would be free. Black servants had no such hope. Their indenture was for life. In fact they were slaves—although it was years before their masters openly admitted the fact.

The Virginia Company never made a profit. By 1624 it had run out of money. The English government put an end to the Company and made itself responsible for the Virginia colonists. There were still very few of them. Fierce Amerindian attacks in 1622 had destroyed several settlements and killed over 350 colonists. Out of nearly 10,000 settlers sent out since 1607, a 1624 census showed only 1,275 survivors.

But their hardships had toughened the survivors. Building a new homeland in the steamy river valleys of Virginia had proved harder and taken longer than anyone had expected. But this first society of English people overseas had put down living roots into the American soil. Other struggles lay ahead, but by 1624 one thing was clear—Virginia would survive.

## The lost colony

The Jamestown settlers were not the first English people to visit Virginia. Twenty years earlier the adventurer Sir Walter Raleigh had sent ships to find land in the New World where English people might settle. He named the land they visited Virginia, in honor of Elizabeth, England's unmarried Queen.

In July 1585, 108 English settlers landed on Roanoke Island, off the coast of what is now the state of North Carolina. They built houses and a fort, planted crops and searched—without success—for gold. But they ran out of food and made enemies of the local Amerindian inhabitants. In less than a year they gave up and sailed back to England.

In 1587 Raleigh tried again. His ships landed 118 settlers on Roanoke, including fourteen family groups. The colonists were led by an artist and mapmaker named John White, who had been a member of the 1585 expedition. Among them were White's daughter and her husband. On August 18th the couple became the parents of Virginia Dare, the first English child to be born in America.

In August White returned to England for supplies. Three years passed before he was able to return. When his ships reached Roanoke in August 1590, he found the settlement deserted. There was no sign of what had happened to its people except a word carved on a tree—"Croaton," the home of a friendly Indian chief, fifty miles to the south. Some believe that the Roanoke settlers were carried off by Spanish soldiers from Florida. Others think that they may have decided to go to live with friendly Indians on the mainland. They were never seen, or heard of, again.