

Article: 17th Century Colonization of the Chesapeake Area

New World Exploration Leads to a Small Settlement

Exploration of the New World in the 15th and 16th centuries by Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, Pedro Alvares Cabral, Vasco Nunez de Balboa, Ferdinand Magellan, Sir Walter Raleigh, and others stimulated English adventurers and capitalists to seek fortune across the Atlantic Ocean. The first English attempt to establish a colony was in 1585 on Roanoke Island, a barrier island belonging in present day North Carolina, southeast of the Chesapeake Bay. The failure of the Roanoke Colony was followed in 1607 by the founding of James Fort (later referred to as the settlement of *Jamestown*) on an island in the James River, which flows to the mouth of the Chesapeake. Chosen as a defensible site against Spanish attack, the location of Jamestown was unknowingly positioned near the heart of the large Powhatan chiefdom.

Barely more than 100 men and boys had set out from England to establish Jamestown. In their ranks were laborers, soldiers, craftsmen, officers, and gentlemen. Three of their journals have survived, telling of ordeals they endured.

A Foothold in Jamestown

The majority did not survive their first year; of the original 104 colonists, only 38 were alive nine months after landing. As the settlers staked claims on Indian land and resources, conflict was inevitable. Disease and hunger proved as deadly as arrows or lead shot.

“Our men were destroyed with cruel diseases as Swellings, Fluxes, Burning Fevers, and by Warres, and some departed suddenly, but for the most part they died of mere famine” (George Percy, *Observations gathered out of a Discourse of the Plantation of the Southerne Colonie in Virginia by the English, 1606*).

For the English to hold the settlement, ships had to bring in more immigrants and supplies.

The Starving Time

Despite the Chesapeake’s bounty, the colonists ran short of food. The early settlers arrived during one of the worst regional droughts in centuries. The Indians were short of corn to trade. Growing hostility made it dangerous to hunt far beyond the safety of the fort. The first settlers relied heavily on stores of preserved foods packed with salt in barrels for transport to America. In mid-August of 1609, seven ships arrived with new colonists but without enough supplies. The situation was dire. Food supplies at Jamestown were exhausted. The colonists were frantic for food. After they ran out of provisions, they consumed meats they would never have willingly swallowed otherwise. First, they slaughtered their horses. Faced with starvation, they ate dogs and cats – animals that had come to Jamestown as passengers on English ships – and even rats. By the winter, the colony’s resources were stretched to the breaking point. Young adults – normally a society’s healthiest members – were dying. The few women and infants at Jamestown were dying. By Spring, more than half the colonists had perished from disease and famine. The winter of 1609 – 1610 has become known as the Starving Time. In May 1610, more colonists and supply ships landed in Jamestown. In journals written four hundred years ago, the surviving colonists credited their arrival with saving the settlement from starvation and abandonment.

Colonial Expansion in the Chesapeake

Spurred by tobacco profits, ships loaded with supplies and new immigrants continued to replenish the settlement, and the colony grew rapidly. In 1634, the new Colony of Maryland was established. Throughout the 17th century, tobacco plantations spread along natural waterways, which were the only practical way to move huge, heavy barrels of dried tobacco, called hogsheads, to port. As settlements grew, so did the need for labor. By the later 1660s, the supply of European servants to the Chesapeake lessened as fewer whites were willing to sign indentures. More and more Africans were being brought to the region to serve as slaves. As a cash crop, tobacco brought prosperity, but at the cost of human suffering.

The Chesapeake offered immigrants upward mobility, despite the dangers of disease, hunger, and hostilities.

Indentured servants, bound by a contract to work a number of years, moved to working as tenant farmers who paid rent or a share of the crop. Most who survived eventually owned small or “middling” plantations. Others suffered at the hands of colonial settlement as race-based slavery took hold in the colonies and the populations of native peoples were decimated by disease and the loss of home lands.

Quick Facts

- 1600 – 30,000 to 40,000 Native Americans lived along the Chesapeake Bay; of that, about 14,000 were the Powhatan

of Virginia.

- 1613 – John Rolfe discovered “gold” in the money to be made from shipping dried tobacco leaves to England.
- 1634 – Virginia’s colonial population had grown to about 4,000, when the Colony of Maryland was established.
- 1644 – Maryland had 600 colonists.
- 1669 – Only 1,800 Powhatans were still living in Virginia.
- 1670 – 41,000 Europeans and Africans were living in the Chesapeake area.



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