

# JAMESTOWN

After five grueling months at sea, a small group of soldiers, laborers, and aristocrats from England completed a 3000-mile journey across the Atlantic and stepped off their ship to greet an unfamiliar new land. The year was 1607 and the land they chose to live on became the first permanent settlement of the British in North America.



Virginia.  
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003669843/>

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### From England to Asia

At the dawn of the seventeenth century in Europe, explorers and their patrons focused on the centuries-old goal of finding a Northwest Passage from Europe to East Asia. Though it was already well known that there was a significant landmass—the Americas—in the Atlantic Ocean, sailors and explorers were often charged with finding water routes around it. Such was the case as the year 1606 drew to a close. The English monarch King James I granted a charter to a private company known as the Virginia Company to build a settlement in the Chesapeake Bay area of North America. As in other attempts at settlement, two of the primary goals were to find gold and to find a water route to Asia. The original Jamestown was also intended to be strategically located far enough from the James River that it would not be in the firing range of ships belonging to hostile powers such as Spain.

### A City on the Swamp

On December 20, 1606, around 100 members of

the Virginia Company sailed across the Atlantic. They reached the Chesapeake Bay in April 1607, and they established a settlement on an island up the James River on May 14, naming it “James Towne” after the current monarch, James I, as was the habit of English settlement. Initial hostility between the colonists and a confederation of native groups led by Chief Powhatan led the settlers to establish forts. Nonetheless, the two groups often engaged in trade, which provided a source of food for Jamestown when settlers were only beginning to clear land for agriculture.

A lack of basic hygiene combined with food shortages and cold weather to cause a number of deaths. By the autumn of 1607, it was apparent that colonists had not worked enough to ensure a stable food supply. Many of those who came with the Virginia Company were aristocrats who refused to demean themselves with agricultural labor. Moreover, Jamestown was in a swampy location, which gave rise to epidemics and disease.

Chief Powhatan supplied the English with food, which likely prevented the settlement from collapsing altogether, but only about 40% of the settlers had survived the harsh winter when additional colonists arrived at the beginning of 1608. John Smith was among the colonists who secured food, and thus the colony, through trade and exploration. During 1607, he devoted his energies to repelling attacks and also explored and mapped the area. In December, he was captured and taken to Chief Powhatan. The chief released him on friendly terms after four weeks. Smith later claimed that this was by the efforts of Powhatan's daughter, Pocahontas, but there is no evidence to support the claim.



Pocahontas saving Captain John Smith from execution  
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2005691455/>

Smith, elected president of the local council in September 1608, imposed a more rigid structure. One of the main rules under his regime was "He who does not work, will not eat." Laziness, particularly among well-heeled colonists, put the settlement in such a precarious position that Smith believed they must be compelled to work to increase the food supply. Though the settlement endured the winter and well into 1609, some of Smith's contemporaries chafed at his strict leadership. Smith left Jamestown in October 1609 to seek medical treatment in London after receiving a gunpowder injury. He never returned to Jamestown, and the settlement experienced a winter known as the "starving time" during which only a few dozen colonists survived. Many of the survivors abandoned Jamestown.

### **Jamestown Reemerges**

The arrival of Lord De La Warr with supplies and new colonists revived Jamestown after its near abandon-

ment in June 1610. De La Warr's ships intercepted many fleeing settlers, a number of whom decided to remain in Jamestown under his governorship. The settlement experienced a much more stable period in the years after De La Warr's arrival, largely from the efforts of John Rolfe, who arrived with the new settlers in 1610. Rolfe is credited as a pioneer in Virginia's tobacco industry, successfully introducing and cultivating tobacco, which became a major export to England. He also ushered in a period of peace between settlers and natives when he married Powhatan's daughter, Pocahontas, in 1614. In 1619, two major events foreshadowed later developments in American history. On July 30, a representative body called the House of Burgesses convened in response to an order by the Virginia Company to establish a government for the entire colony, making it the first of its kind in North America. That same year, a Dutch trader introduced what may have been the first African slaves to the continent.

Though the settlement to this point had been essentially a business venture administered by the equivalent of a private corporation, the 1620s brought major changes to the colony. The native people became increasingly frustrated with the encroachment of settlers on what they considered to be their lands. In 1622, attacks made on various colonial plantations left 300 dead. Jamestown was spared, but this episode discredited the administration of the Virginia Company. Jamestown was in many ways a losing business venture. In 1624, James I revoked the Company's charter and designated Virginia as a royal colony.

The town thrived for several decades in the seventeenth century, but declined in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the twentieth century, however, archaeologists uncovered several of the settlement's buildings, and today visitors can view many of the homes and belongings of the people who first brought Jamestown into being.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

Compare two or three maps created at different times. What differences can you see? How do they compare to a current map of Virginia or the eastern United States?

Put a series of maps in chronological order based on clues on the items; distribute the bibliographic information so students can check accuracy.

Create a time line of explorations of North America.

Compare various images of Pocahontas. What differences are apparent? What similarities?

How do these images compare to other things you know about Pocahontas?

What can you learn about Native American villages and dwellings from examining the pictures? How does this information compare to what you know from other sources?

What can you learn about Native American clothing and customs from examining the pictures?

How does this information compare to what you know from other sources?



Virginia 1606  
<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2005688548/>

Compare how the images portray the Native Americans and the settlers. What bias or perspective is evident? How does this information compare to what you know from other sources?

Brainstorm what you know about the people connected with Jamestown. (Possibilities include: Powhatan, Pocahontas, John Smith, John Rolfe, King James I.) Research the facts and compare the role each played in the development of the settlement.

Select items created at various times in history and compare how each portrays Jamestown.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



### Today in History: September 10

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/today/sep10.html>



### Today in History: May 14

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/today/may14.html>



### Meet Amazing Americans: Pocahontas

[http://www.americaslibrary.gov/aa/pocahonta/aa\\_pocahonta\\_subj.html](http://www.americaslibrary.gov/aa/pocahonta/aa_pocahonta_subj.html)



### Jump Back in Time: September 10, 1608

[http://www.americaslibrary.gov/jb/colonial/jb\\_colonial\\_smith\\_1.html](http://www.americaslibrary.gov/jb/colonial/jb_colonial_smith_1.html)



### Jump Back in Time: May 14, 1607

[http://www.americaslibrary.gov/jb/colonial/jb\\_colonial\\_jamestown\\_1.html](http://www.americaslibrary.gov/jb/colonial/jb_colonial_jamestown_1.html)



### American Memory Timeline: Colonial Settlement, 1600-1763

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/time-line/colonial/index.html>

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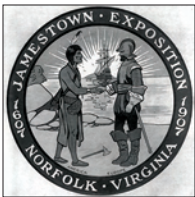
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