

Early Jamestown: Why Did So Many Colonists Die?

In the spring of 1607, three English ships carrying more than 100 passengers sailed into the mouth of **Chesapeake Bay** and worked their way up the James River. Hopes were high, and with good reason. This was to be the first permanent English settlement in the New World. A strong group of English investors stood behind the enterprise. The King of England, James I, had given the colonizers his blessing. Along the river banks one could see freshwater streams, “faire meddowes and goodly tall trees.” Ahead lay possible riches, a native population to be taught the ways of Jesus Christ, and maybe even a hidden trade route to China!

True, there were dangers. A Spanish warship or two would not be a surprise. Also, the English had experienced a recent failure on nearby Roanoke Island. In fact all the Roanoke colonists had mysteriously disappeared. But in 1607, these were acceptable risks.

What was probably more important is that the “faire meddowes and goodly tall trees” of the Chesapeake were not empty. Some 15,000 **Powhatan** Indians lived in small villages along and around the James River. They were loosely ruled by a great chief named **Wahunsonacock**. One of Wahunsonacock’s daughters was the fabled Pocahontas, a very real person who would one day marry an Englishman and sail to England.

When the English settlers arrived they built a fort on a place they called James Island. This was to become Jamestown. Of the 110 original

settlers, only 40 would be alive at the end of December. The arrival in January of a resupply ship saved the colony from total collapse, but in the next two years, hard times continued.

Captain John Smith who had provided much needed leadership was sent back to England. Then, in the awful winter of 1609-1610, two-thirds of the settlement died.

Remarkably, the English kept coming – men, women, and children. The vast majority were young (17 to 35) and most were poor.



Roanoke: Arrival, 1590. The Granger Collection, New York

They hoped to work off their debt and, one day, own a piece of land. A few arrived with money, and some would one day find success growing tobacco. But for most there was no happy ending. By 1611, of the more than 500 settlers who had arrived at Jamestown, 80% were dead.

It is truly amazing that the colony survived. Those English, both in Jamestown and back in the mother country, were a determined bunch. Our focus, however, is not on the survival, but on the near destruction. In a Mini-Q, five documents can only tell part of the story but that is the challenge. Examine the documents that follow and do your best to answer the question: *Early Jamestown: Why did so many colonists die?*

Background Essay Questions

1. Why did the English come to America in 1607?
2. Who helped pay for settling the James River colony?
3. How many settlers died in the first six months?
4. Define or explain each of these terms:

Chesapeake Bay

Powhatan

Wahunsonacock

5. With regard to age and social class, who were the first settlers?

1600 – Shakespeare writes Hamlet

1607 – Jamestown colonized

1608 – Galileo builds telescope

1609 – Galileo discovers the rings of Saturn

1612 – First tobacco harvest at Jamestown

1616 – Pocahontas visits the king of England

1619 – First African-Americans arrive at Jamestown

1620 – Pilgrims arrive in Massachusetts

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Document A

Source: Dennis B. Blanton, "Jamestown's Environment," Center for Archaeological Research, College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia, 2000.

Many people have commented over the last four centuries on the qualities of Jamestown's environment....

Because the adjacent river and creeks became brackish as water levels rose, reliable sources of fresh water would have been scarce by the seventeenth century ..., English colonists dug shallow wells to supply themselves with sources of drinking water, but these were vulnerable to drought and salt water intrusion. Also, historian Carville V. Earle attributed ... disease in the early years to Jamestown's position at the salt-fresh water transition, where filth introduced into the river tended to fester rather than flush away.

The island is not situated at a point of great natural food abundance, especially relative to other locations very close by.... Fish are present in local streams, but only in the spring and early summer are they there in impressive abundance....

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Document Analysis

1. What is brackish water?
2. What twice daily event would cause water levels around Jamestown to rise and cause wells and fresh water streams to become brackish? (Hint: The moon)
3. According to Carville Earle, what happened to human waste that got dumped into the river?
4. What inference can you make about the effect of tides on health in Jamestown?
5. Consider the last paragraph. What time of the year do you think starvation was most likely to happen?