

## The Jamestown Experience

Jamestown, Virginia, was founded in April of 1607. Captain John Smith became the leader of the colony in 1608. Many people know that Jamestown was the first permanent English settlement in North America; however, despite existing firsthand accounts from John Smith and members of his crew, various myths about Jamestown exist. For example, many believe that Pocahontas, a Powhatan American Indian, married John Smith, but she actually married another colonist named John Rolfe. It also is unlikely that Chief Powhatan, Pocahontas' father, attempted to kill John Smith.

In 1606, 105 settlers set sail from England for the purpose of seeking financial opportunity and spreading Christianity in the New World. Their expedition was funded by the Virginia Company of London, a joint stock company. Although the settlers were initially welcomed by the American Indians who lived in Virginia, it was not long before the Europeans began to try to enslave them; destroy their villages; and kill their men, women, and children. The American Indians defended themselves and eventually retaliated in the hope of saving their way of life. The settlers built a fort to protect themselves from future attacks.

The citizens of Jamestown experienced many unfortunate events during the early years of their colony. The marshy area where they settled was infested with malaria-carrying mosquitoes, John Smith was captured (but later released) by the Powhatan tribe, and many of the settlers starved to death in the winter of 1609 during what become known as "The Starving Times." Because the settlers did not plant crops to sustain their colony through the winter, they had to resort to eating their horses, pets, and vermin such as rats, and some even engaged in cannibalism. By 1610, only ninety-seven settlers were still alive, and only sixty remained in Jamestown.

Captain John Smith included this description in his record of the experience:

Nay, so great was our famine, that a Salvage we slew and buried, the poorer sort tooke him up againe and eat him; and so did divers one another boyled and stewed with roots and herbs: And one amongst the rest did kill his wife, powdered her, and had eaten part of her before it was known; for which hee was executed, as hee well deserved: now whether shee was better roasted, boyled or carbonado'd, I know not; but of such a dish as powdered wife I never heard of. This was that time, which still to this day we called the starving time . . .

*John Smith, The Generall Historie of Virginia by Captain John Smith, 1624 the Fourth Booke*

After that terrible winter, English ships with supplies and additional people arrived, and Jamestown eventually prospered. Another reason Jamestown began to thrive was the arrival of women. There were no women in the original group (although two women arrived in 1608 and were present during the winter of 1609). As more women arrived in the colony, the men settled down, married, and began raising crops.

John Rolfe successfully experimented with tobacco seeds from Trinidad and made tobacco a prosperous crop. The Virginia colonists needed a labor source to cultivate their numerous tobacco fields, so they began employing indentured servants from Europe. The indentured servants signed a contract and agreed to work for 3 to 7 years in exchange for their passage to the New World.

In 1619, a ship arrived carrying African people who were captured during war against the Portuguese. The Africans were traded to the Virginia colony, where they were forced to become indentured servants. In some cases, these African indentured servants were mistreated, murdered, or died of illnesses, and unlike the European indentured servants, it was difficult for the Africans to run away because they could not blend in with the settlers by pretending to be European colonists. Eventually, the colonists needed an inexhaustible supply of laborers to cultivate their crops, and as a result, slavery was introduced to the New World, where it quickly flourished as more and more African people were brought to the colony.

The Jamestown pioneers' eventual economic success inspired additional European settlers to travel to the new land known as America, where many of them also prospered.