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Colonial Settlement, 1600s-1763

The English Establish a Foothold at Jamestown, 1606-1610

Overview	Documents
<div><p>Virginia Discovery and Exploration</p><p>On December 20, 1606, ships of the London Company set sail from England to establish a colony in Virginia. The would-be colonists arrived in Chesapeake Bay in April 1607. On board were 105 men, including 40 soldiers, 35 "gentlemen," and various artisans and laborers.</p><p>The Company had instructed Captain Newport, the commander of the ships, to find a site for a colony that was secure from Spanish discovery and attack but that also had easy access to the sea. He therefore sailed up a river (which the English named the James) and fifty miles from its mouth found a low-lying, marshy peninsula that seemed to meet all specifications. There they established what they called James towne.</p><p>At first, things seemed to go well. The colonists cleared some land and erected a palisade for protection. Inside the palisade they built small, rather rude, dwellings. The colonists also began to clear some land for planting crops. Meanwhile the natives in the area, a confederation of tribes led by Powhatan, seemed to change from initial hostility to friendship and hospitality. With the natives' offers of food and friendship, the English began to pay less attention to planting crops and more to exploring the region for quick riches.</p><p>Despite the early promise of success, there were already danger signs. During the summer and autumn, many colonists began to sicken and die. In part, we now know, illness and death were caused by siting Jamestown at a very swampy, unhealthy location. In addition, many colonists had brought with them typhoid and dysentery (what people at the time called "the bloody flux"), which became epidemic because the colonists did not understand basic hygiene. Further, the water supply at Jamestown was contaminated both by human wastes and seawater.</p><p>Moreover, by autumn it became obvious that the colonists had insufficient food to get them through the winter. Not enough land had been cleared and not enough crops had been planted and harvested. Part of the problem here was that the "gentlemen" resisted working like mere laborers. Fortunately for the colonists, Powhatan remained friendly and supplied the English with food. Even so, by the time the "first supply" of more settlers and provisions arrived in early 1608, only 35 of the initial colonists had survived.</p></div>	<div><ul style="list-style-type: none">■ A Justification for Planting Virginia Before 1609■ Captain John Smith Describes the Voyage of the First Colonists in Virginia, 1606-1607■ Building Jamestown and Conflicts Among the Colony's Leaders■ Other Witnesses to Jamestown Between Founding and the First Supply■ The Arrival of the First Supply to Jamestown, January 1608■ Some Observations on the Second Supply to Jamestown, September 1608■ John Smith's "Rude" Letter to the Virginia Company, 1608 (possibly September)■ The Jamestown Colonists Compare Their Efforts with the Spanish■ John Smith Compels the Colonists to Work, 1609■ John Smith Assesses the Accomplishments and Problems of Jamestown, 1609 and 1612■ John Smith, Wounded, Retires from Virginia, 1609■ Instructions to Governor Sir Thomas Gates, May 1609■ The Virginia Company's Public Relations Campaign, 1609■ The "Starving Time," Winter of 1609-1610</div>

Although the evidence is skewed in his favor, there is little question that Captain John Smith saved Jamestown. He organized the colonists and forced them to work in productive ways. He was also able to trade with the natives for food stuffs; when they were reluctant to trade, he took what he needed, souring relations with the natives. Although Smith soon returned to England, his and other colonists' reports back to the London Company led that body to change some of its methods. Essentially it codified Smith's dictatorial regime by bestowing much greater authority on the colonial governor.

A Note About Reading These Documents: You will probably have difficulty reading some of these documents. The documents were written in Early Modern English and people at the time spelled words differently and often were inconsistent in their spellings. One source of help is a [Table of Explanations](#) of Early Modern English prose, from the Thomas Jefferson Papers. You might also benefit by reading the documents aloud.

For additional documents related to this topic, we would suggest focusing on the collection in [American Memory](#) most pertinent to early Jamestown, [The Capitol and the Bay](#). Within that collection are two essential sources: *Captain John Smith's Generall Historie of Virginia* and the four volumes edited by Peter Force in the mid-19th century. Both of these sources are full-text searchable via [The Capitol and the Bay](#).
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- [The Colonists Nearly Abandon Jamestown, 1610](#)
- [Jamestown Given New Life, 1610](#)