

Settlers at Jamestown

By Erin Sawyer

Journey to the New World

In the early 17th century, a group of English gentlemen sailed away from England in search of a new home. They wanted to be great explorers and bring new goods and riches to their home country, like the Spanish. They also hoped to spread Christianity.

In this time period, being a gentleman meant that even though you weren't a member of nobility – like a duke or a prince – you were still in a higher class than those who practiced trades, like blacksmiths or tailors. Even though many of the men of the Virginia Company were gentlemen, they brought tradesmen and workers on their journey because they knew their skills would be needed when they settled on new territory.



This engraving is from 1874. It shows settlers chopping wood with axes in Jamestown.

Their journey to the New World was challenging right from the start. After leaving England, they sailed into a violent storm that nearly took them off course. They lived on three cramped and crowded ships, which made for uncomfortable living conditions. To make matters worse, many men had different thoughts on how their exploration should be conducted, so they often got into terrible arguments and fights.

Finally, on April 26, 1607, they saw land, and decided to dock their ships on a marshy peninsula – a piece of land surrounded by water on three sides. They named their settlement “Jamestown” in honor of King James I. After a few days, one of the settlers wrote that it the new land was a “paradise.”

Relationship with Native Americans

By 1607, there had been several expeditions to the New World. The Jamestown settlers expected to find Native Americans settled on the peninsula; however no Native Americans were to be found. The English soon discovered why this was: the area they had chosen as their new home was a very difficult place to live. It was certainly no “paradise.” The marshy land made it hard to plant crops, especially since the English weren’t familiar with the area.

The Powhatan Indians did, however, live close to the Jamestown peninsula. But a tense relationship between the settlers and the Powhatans developed, making the settlement an even more difficult place to live. Although some of the Powhatan Indians were friendly and curious about the English, others were hostile. Previous settlers had treated the Native Americans of the New World cruelly, so they were wary of the English.

The English built a fort around their settlement to protect themselves from attacks; however attacks were only one of their many worries. Without any stable crops, many of the men starved. The area inside the fort



Today, some of the quarters we use are “Virginia” quarters. The back of the Virginia quarter shows the three ships the original settlers sailed in from England to Jamestown. It was a long and dangerous journey.

and the river from which they lived became filthy and polluted, so many more men died of disease. Soon, the men began to fight with each other. They accused the healthier men of stealing or hiding food. They also fought about who should be in charge. The English gentlemen had a very difficult time, because they weren't used to doing the hard work of tradesmen and craftsmen.

By the end of September, half of the 104 original settlers had died, and a cold winter was coming.

The Powhatan were a strong and mighty tribe. They could have easily attacked the English, taking advantage of them while they were starving and vulnerable, but they sent food instead. Around this time, a ship from England arrived with a new group of settlers. Although the English and Native Americans still did not have completely peaceful relations, they both decided to help one another. They traded goods, services and knowledge. With help from the Powhatan and a fresh delivery of manpower and supplies to Jamestown, the colony soon regained its strength. Captain John Smith became its new leader. Sadly, despite the Native Americans' generosity during the settlers' most difficult times, the working relationship between the Native Americans and English soon fell apart.

Jamestown's first years were filled with hardship and challenges. However, archaeologists – scientists who dig into the earth looking for clues about life hundreds of years ago – have discovered that not all of their experiences were gloomy. When archaeologists dug into Jamestown, they discovered many games, including dice, chess pieces and game boards, which had been hidden beneath the earth for hundreds of years.

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