
Ohio Chapter of the Society of Colonial Wars Scholarship

“The Influence of Privateering on the Colony of Roanoke”

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England's first attempt to colonize America derived from the country's interest in privateering. Privateering originated as a means for merchants to recover the value of cargoes lost at sea. Ship owners had to convince the government through accurate, witnessed accounts that their cargo had been stolen. If approved, they were awarded licenses of retaliation to seize Spanish goods equivalent to the amount lost, giving a portion of each prize to the government. Initially, this procedure was tightly controlled, but it became increasingly corrupt. Merchants began to buy fraud licenses, or even raid ships without any documented permission. While privateering increased tensions between England and Spain, it also became a type of sport for English gentlemen. They viewed privateering as an extravagant game of gambling, and would finance ventures in hopes of gaining great fortune. Sir Walter Raleigh was one of the few successful gentlemen investors. His involvement in privateering was the chief motive in establishing a colony at Roanoke.

Roanoke, England's first settlement in the New World, is best known for the mysterious disappearance of its colonists in 1587. However, these colonists were not the first to settle in Roanoke. A previous colony had been attempted in 1585, originally meant to serve as a privateering base. Ironically, the settlements' link to privateering became the cause of its downfall. It influenced the colony's site, the choice of settlers, and the behavior of those who were sent to aid them. Privateering was both the reason for Roanoke's establishment and destruction.

The first fateful decision based on privateering was the choice of location for Raleigh's colony. He wanted a site near enough to the West Indies to intercept major trading ships, yet sufficiently secluded to serve as a hiding place from pursuing Spanish

fleets. Roanoke Island, located in present day North Carolina, is nestled between a line of coastal islands known as the Outer Banks and the mainland, thus providing an ideal shelter for privateering. Raleigh sent an expedition in 1584 under the command of Philip Amadas and Arthur Barlowe to survey the land. When Amadas and Barlowe discovered Roanoke, they were so impressed by the shelter its location provided that they failed to adequately explore or test the land. This lack of planning ultimately proved fatal.

Once Amadas and Barlowe enthusiastically reported back to Raleigh on the promise of the land, arrangements for the colony were made. Seven ships departed England on April 9, 1585 for North Carolina. At their destination, the colony-bound settlers began to understand for the first time the inadequacy of their chosen site. Roanoke Island is surrounded by shallow sounds unsuitable as anchorages for the large English ships. One of the larger ships, the *Tiger*, became stuck and the major supply of food was destroyed. The other ships were forced to anchor several miles off shore completely exposed to the Atlantic Ocean. It was clear that Roanoke would not be a suitable harbor for privateering ventures. In addition, the colonists were left with a scarce supply of food.

A second example of the detrimental influence of privateering on the colony was the choice of settlers. The majority of Roanoke's first colonists were veterans of the Irish or European wars. Their war experience made them strong candidates because they would be able to defend the territory, especially against the Spanish. However, their war mentality was not helpful in maintaining Indian relationships. The English veterans felt both vulnerable and superior to the Indian natives. They believed the Indians would desire instruction in English ways, yet they were reliant upon the Indians for food and

knowledge of the new territory. Trained not to appear vulnerable, the colonists were reluctant to give a more pacific approach a chance and therefore decided to intimidate the Indians with their English weapons. This tactic only increased tension between the cultures and the English failed to create lasting bonds with the Indians. However, because their provisions had been ruined during anchorage, the colonists relied upon the Indians for food. Native tribes were aware of this and used it to their advantage. At one point several tribes conspired, refusing to sell or trade any food with the English settlers. The weakened colonists were forced to live off the land as best they could.

Another flaw in the selection of colonists was the dominance of single men. Without the presence of wives and children, male settlers were poor at building society. They tended to rely on Indians for food and guidance instead of working to become self sufficient.

The connection of the Roanoke settlement and privateering is further emphasized in the behavior of those who were sent to assist the struggling colony. For example, soon after the colonists first arrived in North Carolina, Raleigh arranged to send an additional ship carrying supplies and food to Roanoke. However, the queen ordered Raleigh to divert his ship to Newfoundland to warn the English there that Spain had captured all English ships in Spanish harbors and that a sea war was on. The ship never arrived in Roanoke, illustrating the underlying concept that the interests of the colony were always secondary to privateering.

Similarly, when Sir Richard Grenville, general of the Roanoke expedition, sailed back to England to replenish the colony's provisions, he became sidetracked by a privateering venture. He arrived in England with a large prize, much to the excitement of

the colony's English backers. While the purpose of Grenville's trip was to acquire much needed food for his desperate colony, it was overshadowed by the success of his cargo raid. The founding of Roanoke stemmed from interest in privateering, but it was this obsession which led to the overlooking of critical problems in the colony. As long as English backers were profiting from privateering escapades, they saw no need to further invest in the settlement's well-being.

Ultimately, the situation is one of great irony. Without England's interest in privateering, Roanoke would never have been founded. However, the dominating emphasis put on privateering also led the colony to its decay. The choice of location, the selection of settlers, and the actions of England's backers were all geared primarily toward the promotion of privateering. Eventually, all of the above became detrimental to the colony's success, forcing the settlers to sail home in August, 1586.

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