

**The Gentlemen of Jamestown**

Russell Harty

## The Gentlemen of Jamestown

The year 2007 marks the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the settling of Jamestown, Virginia, the first permanent English settlement in North America. In these past four hundred years, Jamestown was thought to be a failure: its settlers, members of Virginia Company, were considered lazy and incompetent “gentlemen” who were more concerned with making riches in the New World rather than establishing a thriving colony, thus leading to many periods of starvation and hostile relationships with the natives. However, recent archaeological discoveries and studies of Jamestown’s climate in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century suggest that the struggles the members of the Virginia Company faced were not entirely their own faults and that in fact many of them were worked hard to persevere through the starvation, harsh weather, and neighboring enemies.

The arise of Jamestown began with King James I granting a charter to the entrepreneurs of the Virginia Company in 1606 to establish an English settlement around the Chesapeake Bay in North America (The Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities). 108 settlers, headed by Captain James Smith, left London in December 2006 on three ships, the *Susan Constant*, the *Godspeed*, and the *Discovery* with three goals: settle Virginia, find gold, and locate a water route to Asia (APVA). 60 miles south from the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, the explorers landed on Jamestown Island and established a colony along the James River on May 14, 1607 (APVA).

From the beginning, the explorers had troubles. The settlers established “James Cittie” in an area that would defend from opposing European forces that would approach by water, however this site was also swampy and was plagued with mosquitoes and water that was not suitable for drinking (Wikipedia). Though it was not inhabited by Native

Americans, the Algonquian tribes did live nearby and often had hostile relationships with the colonists. At they times conducted business with each other; the settlers traded their metal tools and other goods for food from the Native Americans. However, encounters between the two sometimes turned violent and those who strayed outside the fort of Jamestown were often killed (Encyclopedia Britannica Online).

With these problems, the first summer for the settlers proved to be difficult. Disease and attacks from the Algonquians killed many while extreme temperatures and a lack of food made it hard for others to get by. A supply ship that arrived at the end of the summer provided relief for the survivors, but this only left them having to face the tumultuous winter of 1609-1610. Due to the fact that they didn't plant crops early enough to be harvested, the colonists were bereft of a supply of food. Residents of Jamestown were forced to first eat their dogs and horses then resorted to digging up graves and eating corpses and eventually their fellow colonists (Encyclopedia Britannica Online). In the autumn of 1609, Jamestown had around five hundred colonists, but by March of 1610, only a fifth of them were still alive (Encyclopedia Britannica Online). Sixty people remained in Jamestown while another forty were fortunate enough to escape on ship (Encyclopedia Britannica Online).

In May, two ships, the *Deliverance* and the *Patience*, arrived at Jamestown with its travelers expecting to find a thriving colony. Instead they found starving residents and because the ships only brought a limited food supply, all the colonists boarded the ships on June 7 to head back to England (Encyclopedia Britannica Online). Several other explorers returned to the Jamestown settlement, but were still faced with the same problems of starvation, harsh weather, and hostile neighbors.

These struggles and failures of Jamestown have long been attributed to the people themselves who settled it. The majority of the settlers were classified as “gentlemen” meaning that they were reluctant to work and their interests rested not in the benefit of the settlement, but in the benefit of themselves. They came to New World as a part of the Virginia Company in search of economic prosperity and thus they did not focus on establishing a successful and thriving settlement. However, archeological studies indicate that these “gentlemen” are not entirely to blame for Jamestown’s problems and many of them were not as unprepared and incompetent as history would suggest.

The most obvious factor of Jamestown’s decline that the colonists could not prevent was the weather. In an article for Smithsonian Magazine, titled “Rethinking Jamestown”, author Jeffery L. Sheler discusses the fact that “the fate of the colony was beyond the control of either the settlers or their London backers” (4). A climate study in 1998 showed that Jamestown was founded during the height of the worst drought for the area in nearly 800 years (4). This drought dried up fresh-water supplies and severely damaged corn crops. Therefore it can be concluded that the reason for the “starving time” was because of the drought and not the laziness of the colonists. Also, because the English and the Native Americans relied on the same food supply, tension between them increased as the food supply for them decreased, thus causing them to be in competition (4). In fact, the authors of the study said that “the period coincides perfectly with bloody battles between the Indians and the English. Relations improved when the drought subsided” (4). It was once believed that the Native Americans had tried to deceive the colonists that food supplies were low while they protected their own food supplies. However, archeologist Dennis Blanton stated in the article that “it becomes clear that

Indian reports of food shortages were not deceptive strategies but probably true appraisals of the strain placed on them from feeding two populations in the midst of drought” (4).

Archeological evidence even shows that relations between the colonists and Native Americans were peaceful at times. For example, archeologist William Kelso found a large amount of Indian items, such as pottery and arrowheads in the remains of the James fort (3). He also found an Indian cooking pot next to a glass bead that the English would have traded with the Indians (3). Kelso’s partner, Beverly Straube, says that this is “evidence of an Indian woman, inside the fort, cooking for an English gentleman” (3). Kelso adds that “the find strongly implies that Natives occasionally were present inside the fort for peaceful purpose and may even have cohabited with the Englishmen (3).” This means that the English settlers had at least attempted to have good relations with the Natives and also gives more support to the idea that the drought is what caused violence and conflict between them.

Along with the Indian artifacts that were discovered, tools of the settlers were also found that indicate that members of the Virginia Company were much better prepared than what has been previously assumed. Fishhooks, weaponry, glassmaking and woodworking equipment, along with bones of game fish and livestock were several of the half a million artifacts that have been uncovered (2). “All of this flies in the face of conventional wisdom, which says that colonists were underfunded and ill-equipped, that they didn’t have the means to survive, let alone prosper,” says Kelso (2).

Despite these finds, some historians are still skeptical of what deductions archaeologists such as Kelso and Straube has made from their discoveries. “It will take a lot more than half a million artifacts to show that the Virginia Company learned from its

mistakes and made a go of it in the colonies,” says Yale University professor Edmund S. Morgan (5). Regardless if they reach a conclusions about whether Jamestown’s settlers were truly hard working, persevering people, the true importance Kelso’s and Straube’s work is that they show that even after 400 years, a historical event can still be reevaluated and perceived to adjust to our understanding in our current times. Maybe in 2107, archeologists will find other evidence that may fully support or completely negate the archeological work that has been done in Jamestown today.

## Bibliography

- “Explorers, Pioneers, and Frontiersmen: The Starving Time.” U-S-history.com. 2002-2005. 2 Mar 2007. <<http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h533.html>>
- “History of Jamestown.” The Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiques. 2000. 4 Mar 2007 <<http://www.apva.org/history/index.html>>
- "Jamestown Colony." Encyclopedia Britannica. 2007. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. 4 Mar. 2007 <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-247838>>.
- “Jamestown, Virginia.” Wikipedia. 4 Mar 2007. 4 Mar 2007. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jamestown%2C\\_Virginia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jamestown%2C_Virginia)>
- Sheler, Jeffery L. “Rethinking Jamestown.” Smithsonian.com. January 2005. 4 Mar 2007. <<http://www.smithsonianmagazine.com/issues/2005/january/jamestown.php>>