

CHAPTER 2

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Trying Times at Jamestown: The Early Months of the First Permanent English Colony

A generation after the failure of Roanoke Island, the English established a permanent colony in the New World. The colony had a difficult beginning, barely surviving its early years. One hundred forty-four men commanded by Captain Christopher Newport departed England for Virginia in December 1606. One hundred four completed the crossing, reaching the Virginia capes in late April of the next year. A few weeks later, Jamestown was under way, the colonists having located fifty miles up the James River. In June, Captain Newport left for England to replenish supplies and secure more settlers. When he returned in January 1608, only 38 of the colonists were still living. In six short months, more than half had perished, and many of the survivors wanted to return home. *Why?*

The following documents, which recount the Jamestown experience during these early months, help answer the question. Included are selections from George Percy's *Observations* (1607) and John Smith's *General History* (1624). Both men made the initial trip to Jamestown, witnessed events during the critical months, and functioned as important leaders in the colony. Smith was a member of the governing council, presiding as president from September 1608 to September 1609. When the council was first created, however, he was excluded by other members; and in early 1608, Smith was nearly condemned to die by council members who alleged he was responsible for the

death of two men. Although a controversial figure during the early years, many historians accept Smith's personal account of his own central role in the colony's survival. Smith justified dictatorial methods as necessary to obtain provisions from the Indians and to organize and motivate the colonists to work.

Percy faced similar problems as council president from September 1609 to May 1610, during the horrible "starving time" described in your textbook, a period when the population dwindled from some 500 to fewer than 100, and again from March to May of 1611. The writings of these two leaders are among the most important sources available concerning England's first permanent colony in the New World. Compare their observations with your textbook's account of Virginia's origins.

These documents reveal more than the details of the settlers' struggle for survival. They also provide information and insight into the early social and political history of Jamestown. As you study them, determine how the colony's inhabitants worked, lived, governed themselves, and adjusted to an alien environment. Be aware of Smith's and Percy's personal reasons for recounting the story of early Jamestown. Make a judgment about their reliability as sources of information on the true character of Virginia society. Finally, use these accounts as resources in developing an explanation for the acute hardship of the colony's early years.

Questions for Analysis

1. What provisions were made for governance in the Jamestown colony? What problems of governance emerged? How were they resolved?
2. Drawing on the evidence in the documents, explain why the Jamestown colonists had such a difficult time in the colony's first seven months. What problems in addition to leadership difficulties confronted them? How did they attempt to deal with these challenges?
3. How did John Smith and George Percy account for the Jamestown colony's survival, despite the problems? What is your evaluation of Smith and Percy as witnesses? Were they in agreement on the "facts"? Explain.
4. In what ways did the Native Americans and the colonists interact? Describe and account for the attitude of the colonists toward the Indians. Speculate on the Indians' attitude toward the colonists, using evidence from the documents to support your views. What were the implications of these contacts for the future?
5. What do the 1625 population statistics reveal about the quality of life in early Virginia? How do these data illuminate the facts of life in the first stage of colonization?

6. What was the significance of the importation of women after 1618? How did this innovation reflect the evolving goals of the London Company? What do the documents reveal about gender relations and the sexual division of labor in early Virginia?

1. George Percy's Observations on Jamestown's Early Months, 1607

The sixth of August [1607], there died *John Asbie*, of the bloody Flux.

The ninth day, died *George Flowre*, of the swelling.

The tenth day, died *William Bruster* Gentleman, of a wound given by the Savages, and was buried the eleventh day.

The fourteenth day, *Jerome Alikock* [Ensign], died of a wound. The same day, *Francis Midwinter* [died], [and] *Edward Moris* Corporal died suddenly.

The fifteenth day, there died *Edward Browne* and *Stephen Galthorpe*.

The sixteenth day, there died *Thomas Gower* Gentleman.

The seventeenth day, there died *Thomas Mounslie*.

The eighteenth day, there died *Robert Pennington*, and *John Martine* Gentlemen.

The nineteenth day, died *Drue Piggase* Gentleman.

The two and twentieth day of August [1607], there died Captain *Bartholomew Gosnold*, one of our Council: he was honorably buried, having all the Ordnance in the Fort shot off, with many volleys of small shot.

After Captain *Gosnold's* death, the Council could hardly agree by the dissension of Captain *Kendall*; [who] afterwards was committed about heinous matters which was proved against him.

The four and twentieth day, died *Edward Harrington* and *George Walker*; and were buried the same day.

The six and twentieth day, died *Kenelme Throgmortine*.

The seven and twentieth day, died *William Roods*.

The eight and twentieth day, died *Thomas Stoodie*, Cape Merchant.

The fourth day of September [1607], died *Thomas Jacob* Sergeant.

The fifth day, there died *Beniamin Beast*.

Our men were destroyed with cruel diseases, as Swellings, Fluxes, Burning Fevers, and by wars; and some departed suddenly: but for the most part, they died of mere famine.

There were never *Englishmen* left in a foreign Country in such misery as we were in this new discovered *Virginia*. We watched every three nights, lying on the bare cold ground, what weather soever came; [and] warded all the next day: which brought our men to be most feeble wretches. Our food was but a small Can of Barly sod[den] in water, to five men a day. Our drink, cold water taken out of the River; which was, at a flood, very salt; at a low tide, full of slime and filth: which was the destruction of many of our men.

Thus we lived for the space of five months [August 1607–8 Jan. 1608] in this miserable distress, not having five able men to man our Bulwarks upon any occasion. If it had not pleased God to have put a terror in the Savages hearts, we had all perished by those wild and cruel Pagans, being in that weak estate as we were; our men night and day groaning in every corner of the Fort most pitiful to hear. If there were any conscience in men, it would make their hearts to bleed to hear the pitiful murmurings and out-cries of our sick men without relief, every night and day, for the space of six weeks [8 Aug.–19 Sept. 1607]: some departing out of the World, many times three or four in a night; in the morning, their bodies [being] trailed out of their Cabins like Dogs, to be buried. In this sort, did I see the mortality of many of our people.

It pleased God, after a while, to send those people which were our mortal enemies, to relieve us with victuals, as Bread, Corn, Fish, and Flesh in great

plenty; which was the setting up of our feeble men: otherwise we had all perished. Also we were frequented by many Kings in the Country, bringing us store of provision to our great comfort.

The eleventh day [of September, 1607], there was certain *Articles* laid against Master *Wingfield* which was then President: thereupon he was not only displaced out of his Presidentship, but also from

being of the Council. Afterwards Captain *John Ratcliffe* was chosen President.

The eighteenth day [of September], died one *Ellis Kinistone*, which was starved [frozen] to death with cold: The same day at night, died one *Richard Simons*.

The nineteenth day [of September], there died one *Thomas Mouton*.

2. John Smith's Impressions of the Jamestown Experience, 1607

Captain *Bartholomew Gosnoll*, one of the first movers of this plantation, having many years solicited many of his friends, but found small assistance; at last prevailed with some Gentlemen, as Captain *John Smith*, Master *Edward-maria Wingfield*, Master *Robert Hunt*, and divers [many] others, who depended a year upon his projects, but nothing could be effected, till by their great charge and industry, it came to be apprehended by certain of the Nobility, Gentry, and Merchants, so that his Majestie by his letters patents [10 April 1606], gave commission for establishing Councils, to direct here; and to govern, and to execute there. To effect this, was spent another year, and by that, three ships were provided, one of 100 Tons, another of 40, and a Pinnace of 20. The transportation of the company was committed to Captain *Christopher Newport*, a Mariner well practiced for the Western parts of *America*. But their orders for government were put in a box, not to be opened, nor the governors known until they arrived in *Virginia*.

On the 19 of December, 1606, we set sail from Blackwall, but by unprosperous winds, were kept six weeks in the sight of *England*; all which time, Master *Hunt* our Preacher, was so weak and sick, that few expected his recovery. . . .

The first land they made they called *Cape Henry*; where thirty of them recreating themselves on shore, were assaulted by five Savages, who hurt two of the English very dangerously.

That night was the box opened, and the orders read, in which *Bartholomew Gosnoll*, *John Smith*, *Edward Wingfield*, *Christopher Newport*, *John Rat[c]cliffe*, *John Martin*, and *George Kendall*, were named to be the Council, and to choose a President amongst them for a year, who with the Council

should govern: Matters of moment were to be examined by a Jury, but determined by the major part of the Council, in which the President had two voices.

Until the 13 of May [1607] they sought a place to plant in; then the Council was sworn; Master *Wingfield* was chosen President, and an Oration made, why Captain *Smith* was not admitted of the Council as the rest.

Now falleth every man to work, the Council contrive the Fort, the rest cut down trees to make place to pitch their Tents; some provide clabboard to reload the ships, some make gardens, some nets, &c. The Savages often visited us kindly. The Presidents overweening jealousy would admit no exercise at arms, or fortification but the boughs of trees cast together in the form of a half moon by the extraordinary pains and diligence of Captain *Kendall*.

Newport, *Smith*, and twenty others, were sent to discover the head of the river: by many small habitations they passed. . . . The people in all parts kindly entreated them, till being returned within twenty miles of *James* town, they gave just cause of jealousy: but had God not blessed the discoverers otherwise then those at the Fort, there had then been an end of that plantation; for at the Fort, where they arrived the next day, they found 17 men hurt, and a boy slaine by the Savages, and had it not chanced a cross bar shot from the Ships struck down a bough from a tree amongst them, that caused them to retire, our men had all been slaine, being securely all at work, and their arms in dry fats.

Hereupon the President was contented the Fort should be pallisaded, the ordnance mounted, his men armed and exercised: for many were the assaults, and ambuscades of the Savages, and our men

by their disorderly straggling were often hurt, when the Savages by the nimbleness of their heels well escaped.

What toil we had, with so small a power to guard our workmen days, watch all night, resist our enemies, and effect our business, to reload the ships, cut down trees, and prepare the ground to plant our Corn, &c, I refer to the readers consideration.

Six weeks being spent in this manner, Captain *Newport* (who was hired only for our transportation) was to return with the ships.

Now Captain *Smith*, who all this time from their departure from the Canaries was restrained as a prisoner upon the scandalous suggestions of some of the chief (envying his repute) who feigned he intended to usurp the government, murder the Council, and make himself King, that his confederates were dispersed in all the three ships, and that many of his confederates that revealed it, would affirm it; for this he was committed as a prisoner.

Thirteen weeks [24 Mar.–10 June 1607], he remained thus suspected, and by that time the ships should return they pretended out of their commiserations, to refer him to the Council in *England* to receive a check, rather than by particulating his designs [to] make him so odious to the world, as to touch his life, or utterly overthrow his reputation. But he so much scorned their charity, and publicly defied the uttermost of their cruelty; he wisely prevented their policies, though he could not suppress their envies; yet so well he demeaned himself in this business, as all the company did see his innocence, and his adversaries malice, and those suborned to accuse him, accused his accusers of subornation; many untruths were alledged against him; but being so apparently disproved, begat a general hatred in the hearts of the company against such unjust Commanders, that the President [*Wingfield*] was adjudged to give him 200*l.*; so that all he had was seized upon, in part of satisfaction, which *Smith* presently returned to the Store for the general use of the *Colony*.

Many were the mischiefs that daily sprung from their ignorant (yet ambitious) spirits; but the good Doctrine and exhortation of our Preacher Master *Hunt* reconciled them, and caused Captain *Smith* to be admitted of the Council [20 June, or rather on 10 June].

The next day all received the Communion, the day following [June 22] the Savages voluntarily desired peace, and Captain *Newport* returned for *England* with news; leaving in *Virginia* 100. the 15 [or rather 22] of June 1607. . . .

Being thus left to our fortunes, it fortuned that within ten days scarce ten amongst us could either go, or well stand, such extreme weakness and sickness oppressed us. And thereat none need marvel, if they consider the cause and reason, which was this.

While the ships stayed, our allowance was somewhat bettered, by a daily proportion of Bisket, which the sailors would pilfer to sell, give, or exchange with us, for money, Sassefras, furs, or love. But when they departed, there remained neither tavern, beer house, nor place of relief, but the common Kettell. Had we been as free from all sins as gluttony, and drunkenness, we might have been canonized for Saints; But our President [*Wingfield*] would never have been admitted, for engrossing to his private [*i.e.*, *his own use*], Oatmeale, Sacke, Oyle, *Aquavitæ*, Beef, Eggs, or what not, but the Kettell; that indeed he allowed equally to be distributed, and that was half a pint of wheat, and as much barley boiled with water for a man a day, and this having fried some 26. weeks [Dec. 1606–June 1607] in the ships hold, contained as many worms as grains; so that we might truly call it rather so much bran than corn, our drink was water, our lodgings Castles in the air.

With this lodging and diet, our extreme toil in bearing and planting Pallisades, so strained and bruised us, and our continual labor in the extremity of the heat had so weakened us, as were cause sufficient to have made us as miserable in our native Country, or any other place in the world.

From May, to September [1607], those that escaped, lived upon Sturgeon, and Sea-crabs, fifty in this time we buried, the rest seeing the Presidents projects to escape these miseries in our Pinnacle by flight (who all this time had neither felt want nor sickness) so moved our dead spirits, as we deposed him [10 Sept. 1607]; and established *Ratcliffe* in his place, (*Gosnoll* being dead [22 Aug. 1607]) *Kendall* deposed [?Sept 1607]. *Smith* newly recovered, *Martin* and *Ratcliffe* was by his care preserved and relieved, and the most of the soldiers recovered with the skillful diligence of Master *Thomas Wotton* our Chirurgical general.

But now was all our provision spent, the Sturgeon gone, all helps abandoned, each hour expecting the fury of the Savages; when God the patron of all good endeavors, in that desperate extremity so changed the hearts of the Savages, that they brought such plenty of their fruits, and provision, as no man wanted.

And now where some affirmed it was ill done of the Council to send forth men so badly provided, this

incontradictable reason will show them plainly they are too ill advised to nourish such ill conceits; first, the fault of our going was our own, what could be thought fitting or necessary we had; but what we should find, or want, or where we should be, we were all ignorant, and supposing to make our passage in two months, with victual to live, and the advantage of the spring to work; we were at Sea five months, where we both spent our victual and lost the opportunity of the time and season to plant, by the unskilfull presumption of our ignorant transporters, that understood not at all, what they undertook.

Such actions have ever since the worlds beginning been subject to such accidents, and every thing of worth is found full of difficulties: but nothing so difficult as to establish a Common wealth so far remote from men and means, and where mens minds are so untoward as neither do well themselves, nor suffer others. But to proceed.

The new President [*Ratcliffe*], and *Martin*, being little beloved, of weak judgement in dangers, and less industry in peace, committed the managing of all things abroad to Captain *Smith*: who by his own example, good words, and fair promises, set some to mow, others to bind thatch, some to build houses, others to thatch them, himself always bearing the greatest task for his own share, so that in short time, he provided most of them lodgings, neglecting any for himself.

This done, seeing the Savages superfluity begin to decrease [he] (with some of his workmen) shipped himself [9 Nov. 1607] in the *Shallop* to search the Country for trade. . . .

Wingfield and *Kendall* living in disgrace, seeing all things at random in the absence of *Smith*, the company dislike of their Presidents weakness, and their small love to *Martins* never mending sickness, strengthened themselves with the sailors and other confederates, to regain their former credit and authority, or at least such means aboard the *Pinnacle*,

(being fitted to sail as *Smith* had appointed for trade) to alter her course and to go for *England*.

Smith unexpectedly returning had the plot discovered to him, much trouble he had to prevent it, till with store of sakre and musket shot he forced them stay or sink in the river: which action cost the life of captain *Kendall*.

These brawls are so disgustfull, as some will say they were better forgotten, yet all men of good judgement will conclude, it were better their baseness should be manifest to the world, then the business bear the scorn and shame of their excused disorders.

The President [*Ratcliffe*] and captain *Archer* not long after intended also to have abandoned the country, which project also was curbed, and suppressed by *Smith*. . . .

And now the winter approaching, the rivers became so covered with swans, geese, ducks, and cranes, that we daily feasted with good bread, Virginia pease, pumpions, and putchamins, fish, fowle and diverse sorts of wild beasts as fast as we could eat them: so that none of our Tuftaffaty humorists desired to go for *England*.

But our *Comœdies* never endured long without a Tragedie. . . .

Now whether it had been better for Captain *Smith*, to have concluded with any of those several projects, to have abandoned the Country, with some ten or twelve of them, who were called the better sort, and have left Master *Hunt* our Preacher, Master *Anthony Gosnoll*, a most honest, worthy, and industrious Gentleman, Master *Thomas Wotton*, and some 27 others of his Countrymen to the fury of the Savages, famine, and all manner of mischiefs, and inconveniences, (for they were but forty in all to keep possession of this large Country;) or starve himself with them for company, for want of lodging: or but adventuring abroad to make them provision, or by his opposition to preserve the action, and save all their lives; I leave to the censure of all honest men to consider.

3. Virginia Population Characteristics, 1625

Ages Given for 750 Persons out of 1,210 Living in January and February, 1625 (Figures in parentheses are percentages)

Age	Male	Female	All
1-5	30 (4.7)	23 (19.8)	53 (7.1)
6-9	5 (0.8)	9 (7.8)	14 (1.9)
10-15	41 (6.5)	10 (8.6)	51 (6.8)
16-19	81 (12.8)	4 (3.4)	85 (11.3)
20-24	212 (33.4)	32 (27.6)	244 (32.6)
25-29	106 (16.7)	14 (12.1)	120 (16.0)
30-34	65 (10.3)	11 (9.5)	76 (10.1)
35-39	41 (6.5)	5 (4.3)	46 (6.1)
Over 39	53 (8.4)	8 (6.9)	61 (8.1)
Total	634 (100)	116 (100)	750 (100)

4. The London Company Instructs the Governor in Virginia, 1622

There come now over in this ship, and are immediately to follow in some others many hundreds of people, to whom as we here think ourselves bound to give the best encouragement for their going, there is no way left to increase the plantation, but by abundance of private undertakers; so we think you obliged to give all possible furtherance and assistance, for the good entertaining and well settling of them, that they may both thrive and prosper and others by their welfare be drawn after them. This is the way that we conceive most effectual for the engaging of this state, and securing of Virginia, for in the multitude of people is the strength of a kingdom. . . .

We send you in this ship one widow and eleven maids for wives for the people in Virginia: there hath been especial care had in the choice of them; for there

hath not any one of them been received but upon good commendations. We pray you all therefore in general to take them into your care; and more especially we recommend that at their first landing they may be housed, lodged, and provided for of diet till they be married; for such was the haste of sending them away, as that straightened with time we had no means to put provisions aboard. And in case they cannot be presently married we desire they may be put to several households that have wives till they can be provided of husbands. There are nearly fifty more which are shortly to come, are sent by certain worthy gentlemen, who taking into their consideration that the plantation can never flourish till families be planted, and the respect of wives and children fix the people on the soil. Therefore have given this fair

beginning: for the reimbursing of whose charges it is ordered that every man that marries them give 120 weight of the best leaf tobacco for each of them, and in case any of them die, that proportion must be advanced to it upon those that survive. That marriage be free according to the law of nature, yet would we not have these maids deceived and married to servants, but only to such free men or tenants as have means to maintain them. We pray you therefore to be

fathers to them in this business, not enforcing them to marry against their wills; neither send we them to be servants, save in case of extremity, for we would have their condition so much bettered as multitudes may be allured thereby to come unto you. And you may assure such men as marry those women that the first servants sent over by the company shall be consigned to them; it being our intent to preserve families, and to prefer married men before single persons.

5. The Trappan'd Maiden: or, The Distressed Damsel, ca. Seventeenth Century

The Girl was cunningly Trappan'd, sent to Virginny from England, Where she doth Hardship undergo, there is no Cure it must be so:

But if she lives to cross the Main, she vows she'll ne'r go there again.

Tune of *Virginny*, or, *When that I was weary, weary, O.*

Give ear unto a Maid, that lately was betray'd,
And sent into Virginny, O:
In brief I shall declare, what I have suffer'd there,
When that I was weary, weary, weary, weary, O.

[Since] that first I came to this Land of Fame,
Which is called Virginny, O,
The Axe and the Hoe have wrought my overthrow,
When that I was weary, weary, weary, weary, O.

Five years served I, under Master Guy,
In the land of Virginny, O,
Which made me for to know sorrow, grief and woe,
When that I was weary, weary, weary, weary, O.

When my Dame says "Go" then I must do so,
In the land of Virginny, O;
When she sits at Meat, then I have none to eat,
When that I am weary, weary, weary, weary, O.

The Cloath[e]s that I brought in, they are worn very thin,
In the land of Virginny, O,
Which makes me for to say, "Alas, and Well-a-day!"
When that I am weary, weary, weary, weary, O.

Instead of Beds of Ease, to lye down when I please,
In the Land of Virginny, O;
Upon a bed of straw, I lye down full of woe,
When that I am weary, weary, weary, weary, O. . . .

So soon as it is day, to work I must away,
In the Land of Virginny, O;

Then my Dame she knocks, with her tinder-box,
 When that I am weary, weary, weary, weary, O.

I have play'd my part both at Plow and Cart,
 In the Land of Virginny, O;
 Billets from the Wood upon my back they load,
 When that I am weary, weary, weary, weary, O.

A thousand woes beside, that I do here abide,
 In the Land of Virginny, O;
 In misery I spend my time that hath no end,
 When that I am weary, weary, weary, weary, O.

Then let Maids beware, all by my ill-fare,
 In the Land of Virginny, O;
 Be sure to stay at home, for if you do here come,
 You all will be weary, weary, weary, weary, O.

But if it be my chance, Homewards to advance,
 From the Land of Virginny, O;
 If that I, once more, land on English Shore,
 I'll no more be weary, weary, weary, weary, O.

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