

1607–1610 — “A few dozen English in a nation of thousands”

The wider world

England has recommitted to joint-stock colonization. The **Virginia Company** outfits three small ships—the *Susan Constant*, *Godspeed*, and *Discovery*—to probe the Chesapeake for a fortified trading post. Across the Channel, Spain still patrols the Bahama Channel, and France is edging into the St. Lawrence. For England, this Chesapeake venture is modest—**just over a hundred colonists** to start—but symbolically huge. ([National Park Service](#))

Who is here already (the scale of the place)

The English arrive inside **Tsenacommacah**, the Powhatan chiefdom—**30+ tributary groups** along the Tidewater rivers. Contemporary reconstructions put **Powhatan population circa 1607 at ~14,000–21,000 people**, living in palisaded towns and dispersed hamlets along the James, York, and Rappahannock. Measured against that, Jamestown is a pinprick. ([Wikipedia](#))

This colony, this fort (numbers you can feel)

- **May 1607: 104** English men and boys land and throw up a triangular fort on an island bend of the James. Within months, disease, brackish water, and raids cut the company to **≈38 survivors** by the time the first resupply reaches them in January 1608. Think *two score people*—every face known to every other one. ([National Park Service](#))
- **1608 resupplies:** Newport’s **First Supply** and **Second Supply** land **~100–120 more settlers** across the year—fresh hands, but also more mouths. A catastrophic fort fire and chronic food shortages keep death rates high. ([Encyclopedia Virginia](#))
- **Winter 1609–1610 — the “Starving Time”:** after drought, war, and supply failure, **only ~60 colonists** are alive in May 1610 when relief boats from Bermuda finally make the river. That’s **60** in an Indigenous world of **tens of thousands**. ([Historic Jamestowne](#))

A week-in-their-boots (what daily life felt like)

Water is brackish; fevers are routine. By late 1607 the fort garrison is already rotating armed watches while **John Smith** barter for maize upriver. In 1608 the **first women** (a handful) and craftsmen arrive with the second supply, but the headcount still hovers in the low hundreds and often plunges well below. The **Powhatan towns** nearby are larger, healthier, and agricultural; English survival depends on their trade and forbearance. ([Wikipedia](#))

The decade as they lived it (tight timeline with headcounts)

- **Dec 1606–May 1607 — Crossing & Landfall.** Three ships, roughly **104 settlers** ashore (with ~39 mariners sailing back). Council quarrels immediately; palisade rises; sickness bites. ([National Park Service](#))
- **Summer–Autumn 1607 — Losing season.** Heat, bad water, and skirmishes; the garrison dwindles. By **Jan 1608**, when Newport’s **First Supply** enters, **only 38** of the original colonists are alive to greet him. ([nationalhumanitiescenter.org](#))
- **1608 — A fragile upswing. First and Second Supplies** add ~**100–120 people**. Smith’s diplomacy with Powhatan and Opechancanough buys maize, but a disastrous fire and continuing disease keep the cemetery busy. The “town” is still a **few score to a couple of hundred** at most, depending on the week. ([Encyclopedia Virginia](#))
- **1609 — The storm & the split.** The **Third Supply** convoy is shattered by hurricanes; the flagship **Sea Venture** wrecks on Bermuda with leaders **Thomas Gates** and **Christopher Newport** aboard. Jamestown doesn’t get the food or officials it expected. On Bermuda, survivors build the pinnaces **Deliverance** and **Patience** to push on to Virginia. ([Wikipedia](#))
- **Winter 1609–1610 — Starving Time (≈80% mortality).** With fields lost, trade broken, and siege conditions, colonists eat horses, dogs, rats—ultimately even human remains. Forensic work on a teenage girl dubbed “**Jane**” has left the clearest physical proof of that desperation. **May 1610: ~60 survivors** remain inside the fort. ([Historic Jamestowne](#))
- **June 1610 — Almost gone, then turned back.** Gates decides to **abandon Jamestown**; the survivors embark and start downriver. At the river’s mouth they meet **Lord De La Warr** arriving with men and supplies; he orders a return and **re-occupation of the fort**. Jamestown persists—barely. ([Historic Jamestowne](#))

Cast of a very small stage (people your essay can name)

- **Powhatan (Wahunsenacawh)** and **Opechancanough** — paramount chief and powerful brother/war-leader who negotiated and coerced in turn; their towns vastly outnumbered the English. ([Wikipedia](#))
- **John Smith** — soldier-trader whose maize diplomacy and ruthless rationing mattered when the headcount was in the dozens. ([Wikipedia](#))
- **George Percy** — gentleman diarist; his grim account preserves the “**38 alive in January 1608**” figure. ([nationalhumanitiescenter.org](#))

- **Thomas Gates, Christopher Newport** — leaders wrecked in Bermuda on the **Sea Venture**, who then arrive with the **Deliverance** and **Patience** in **May 1610** to find **only 60** alive. ([Wikipedia](#))
- **Lord De La Warr** — the governor whose timely landfall in **June 1610** turned the evacuation around. ([Historic Jamestowne](#))
- **Jane (unnamed in 1610)** — the teenager whose butchered remains, analyzed by **Smithsonian** and **Historic Jamestowne**, put a human face on the Starving Time. ([Smithsonian Institution](#))

What the numbers mean (for your “feel of the crowd”)

- **Powhatan world: ~14–21k people** in dozens of towns—fields, storehouses, diplomacy, and war parties on command. The English are a **tiny foreign contingent** within this nation. ([Wikipedia](#))
- **Jamestown colony:** oscillates from **~104** down to **38**, up to **~200-ish** with resupplies, then down to **~60**—that’s an **extended family’s worth of survivors** holding a burnt, muddy fort. ([National Park Service](#))

If you want individual micro-essays next

1. **“The 38.”** A day-by-day reconstruction from Percy’s narrative (autumn 1607–Jan 1608), naming the trades that survived (carpenter, cooper, soldier, minister) and the ones that vanished. ([nationalhumanitiescenter.org](#))
2. **“Sea Venture to Deliverance.”** Nine months on Bermuda, shipbuilding in cedar, and the moral shock of finding **60** alive at James Fort. ([Wikipedia](#))
3. **“Jane.”** The forensics (cut-marks, dietary isotopes), what they say about the winter, and why this evidence changed the historiography of the Starving Time. ([Smithsonian Institution](#))