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James' Towne

Joseph P. Cullen

When a small group of adventurers left London in 1606 to create a permanent colony in Virginia, everyone involved—from the settlers themselves to the stockholders in the company who remained at home and hoped to profit from their investments—recognized that their undertaking involved numerous dangers. If they needed a reminder, they had only to consider the fate of the colony planted by Sir Walter Raleigh on Roanoke Island some twenty years earlier. Awareness of potential difficulties, however, as this article by Joseph P. Cullen reminds us, does not guarantee preparation for solving those problems successfully. The settlers of Jamestown made one mistake after another, beginning with attempting to sail from England into the teeth of a storm and continuing with the spot that they picked to settle in Virginia. Indeed, it seems a wonder that Jamestown did not go the way of Raleigh's "Lost Colony," as it nearly did after the winter of 1609-1610. As you read this article, count the mistakes made, ask if any could have been foreseen or avoided, and above all, look for an explanation of how Jamestown managed to survive and give England her foothold in North America.

December 20, 1606 dawned cold and blustery. Under a lowering sky three small ships, moored at Blackwell in East London, prepared to sail down the river Thames en route to the distant West Indies and the little-known land of Virginia. As the last of the stores were put aboard the passengers lined the rails for a farewell look at a friend or relative. For most of them it would be a last look.

To a casual observer those passengers must have seemed a strange and motley group. Most noticeable, perhaps, was the absence of women. And the gentlemen in their colorful silks and satins appeared in sharp contrast to the drab attire of the soldiers and ordinary working people, artisans and laborers, and about half a dozen boys. The observer might have wondered what such people could possibly have in common. Yet they did have something – they were all adventurers about to engage in a desperate gamble with their lives to seek their fortunes, and they all must have been somewhat apprehensive.

To be sure, ever since Columbus had discovered the New World in 1492 many expeditions had crossed the vast Atlantic ocean and returned, all of them larger and better equipped than this little fleet, however. The Spanish had even founded colonies there, but the English had not been so successful, all of their attempts having ended in failure, the most spectacular and tragic being the attempt by Sir Walter Raleigh in 1587 to found a colony on Roanoke Island. No trace of these settlers was ever found. This knowledge must have weighed heavily on the minds of both passengers and crew.

Despite an obvious storm building up on the horizon, the little fleet hoisted anchor and dropped slowly down the river with the flagship *Sarah Constant* (100 tons), commanded by Captain Christopher Newport and carrying seventy-one people, in the lead, followed by the *Godspeed* (forty tons) commanded by Captain Bartholomew Goswold and carrying fifty-two persons, with the little pinnace *Discovery* (forty tons) under Captain John Ratcliffe and carrying twenty-one persons, bringing up the rear. In the teeth of a rising gale they beat their way down the English Channel and headed out to sea.

For some on the shore watching the ships disappear from view there must have been much anxiety. A few probably doubted Captain Newport's wisdom in putting out to sea in such weather, even though he was an experienced sailor who had sailed the ocean. After all, this was a business enterprise and many people had invested goodly sums in the expectation of liberal profits. King James I had granted a charter to a group of stockholders known as the Virginia Company of London to explore and settle in the New World and above all to produce and send back to the mother country much needed products. Particularly wanted were such things as pitch and tar, potash and soap ashes, timber and timber products such as clapboard and shingles, glass, herbs, and of course, minerals such as gold and silver. The Company hoped that this first group would set up a permanent base which could then be built up with new settlers and supplies.

As it developed, Newport made a serious error with his decision to sail in the face of the storm. On January 5 he was forced to anchor just off the Kentish coast, and for almost a month the little fleet pitched and rolled through one storm after another. Precious supplies were consumed, scurvy and other sickness spread in the cramped, unsanitary quarters, and more important, the members divided into quarrelling factions, a pattern that continued throughout the voyage and after they landed. When the fierce weather finally abated, Newport made another fateful decision. Instead of returning to shore to replenish his supplies, he elected to continue the voyage.

Despite the bad beginning, the remainder of the voyage was relatively uneventful and late in March they reached the West Indies. Here they refreshed themselves for several days in "a very faire Iland... full of sweet and good smels." After needless delay Newport set sail again April 10 and on April 26, according to one member of the company, "wee entered into the Bay of Chesupioc... There wee landed and discovered a little way, but wee could find nothing worth the speaking of, but faire meddowes and goodly tall Trees, with such Fresh-waters running through the woods... The nine and twentieth day we set up a Crosse at Chesupioc Bay, and named that place Cape Henry. Thirtieth day, wee came with our ships to Cape Comfort..." After exploring this area for several days they moved on and at last came to a spit of land jutting out into the James River, as they named it. And here on May 14 with their "shippes... moored to the Trees in six fathom water" the weary settlers went ashore to found *James Towne,* the first permanent colony in the New World.

Whether or not the decision to settle here was a wise one is debatable. The settlers themselves disagreed over it. Yet, in general they had followed their instructions to locate on a large and navigable river far enough inland to avoid a surprise attack from the sea by the Spanish. They were also instructed to pick a healthful spot and avoid low and marshy areas, which this of course was. As a later observer noted, "It is low ground, full of Marches and Swamps, which makes the

Aire, expecially in the Sumer, unsalubritious and unhelthy." Another drawback was the lack of clear streams and springs, forcing them to drink the murky river water before wells could be dug. And the area was heavily wooded, which required hard labor to clear it before crops could be planted. But in May in Virginia the weather was pleasant, the days warm, the nights cool, and the mosquitoes not yet buzzing. As one of the settlers, Captain John Smith, noted, it was a "verie fit place for the erecting of a great cittie."

The instructions from the Company, which had been kept in a locked box until Virginia was reached, named seven Councilors, who would elect: their own President, to govern the colony. John Smith was one of the Councilors and Edward Wingfield was elected the first President among much feuding. Under their direction the colonists set about their assigned tasks. "Now falleth every man to worke," wrote Smith, "the Councell contrive a Fort, the rest cut downe trees to make place to pitch their tents; some provide clapboard to relade the shippes, some make gardens, some nets." While this work was proceeding, Newport led a group exploring up the James River as far as the fall line, the present day site of Richmond, searching for gold and silver and a possible route to the western sea.

Despite Smith's statement that every man went to work, such was not the ease, unfortunately. The Gentlemen, who comprised almost half of the settlers at this time, regarded it as beneath their dignity to labor or to work at any task if they did not feel so inclined. Some did go on exploration trips, while others just roamed the beaches and woods where they found the "pleasantest suckles, the ground all flowing over with faire flowers... many strawberries... woods full of Cedar and Cypresse... and other fruits and herbes..." Yet by June 15 a fort, crude as it was, was completed, described by a colonist as being "triangle wise, having three Bulwarkes, at every corner, like a halfe Moone, and foure or five pieces of Artillerie mounted in them." It encompassed a little less than an acre of ground with the river side about 400 feet long and the other two sides about 300 feet. In this small area were streets, storehouses, shelters, a church, and living quarters for over 100 men. All the buildings were necessarily rough and primitive, constructed of mud walls, wattle and daub, thatched roofs of dried marshgrass, and clay floors. Some English wheat and other crops had been planted, but the amount was small, they were carelessly tended, and it was late in the season. Another problem was that almost all of these pioneers in the wilderness were city-bred, and not a single one was a farmer.

Interested observers of all this strange activity were the natives, the Indians. Described by Smith as "generally tall and straight, of a comely proportion, and of a colour browne when they are of any age, but they are borne white. Their haire is generally black; but few have any beards. The men weare halfe their heads shaven, the other halfe long..." They could be friendly or hostile, depending on how they were treated. But from the beginning they were mistreated, deceived and cheated, due in part to the settlers' instructions, and in part to the constant quarrelling and lack of leadership among the settlers themselves. They were instructed not to teach the Indians to shoot or even let them carry their weapons for fear they might steal them. They were told to establish trade with the natives for corn and "all other lasting victuals" in order to avoid starvation, but this should be done "before they perceive that you mean to plante among them." No permanent effective trade ever was established, however, as the Council members were too busy feuding and intriguing against each other to make or set a humane policy, much less enforce it.

As Robert Beverley stated in his famous *The History and Present State of Virginia,* published in 1705: "...the English had a very advantageous Trade with the Indians; and might have made much greater Gains of it, and managed it both to the greater Satisfaction of the Indians, and greater Ease and Security of themselves; if they had been under any Rule, or subject to any Method in Trade, and not left at Liberty to outvie or outbid one another; by which they not only cut short their own Profit, but created Jealousies and Disturbances among the Indians, by letting one have a better bargain than another: For they being unaccustom'd to barter, such of them as had been hardest dealt by in their Commodities, thought themselves cheated and abused; and so conciev'd a Grudge against the English in general, making it a National Quarrel: And this seems to be the original Cause of most of their subsequent Misfortunes by the Indians."

Among the Indians intermarriage was regarded as a token of sincere friendship and trust, and although the colonists regarded it as one of their responsibilities to Christianize the natives, they generally refused to sanction intermarriage which could have changed the development of the colony, and indeed the development of the future United States. As Beverley noted: "Intermarriage had been indeed the Method proposed very often by the Indians in the Beginning, urging it frequently as a certain Rule, that the English were not their Friends, if they refused it. And I can't but think it wou'd have been happy for that Country, had they embraced this Proposal: For, the Jealousie of the Indians, which I take to be the Cause of most of the Rapines and Murders they committed, wou'd by this Means have been altogether prevented... the Colony, instead of all these Losses of Men on both sides, wou'd have been encreasing in Children to its Advantage... and, in all Likelihood, many, if not most, of the Indians would have been converted to Christianity by this kind Method."

No such policy was ever followed and relations with the natives constantly fluctuated, sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile, with the colonists seldom ever knowing in advance which to expect. The first attack occurred before Newport returned from his trip up the James, but the settlers found safety in the ships and the naval cannon frightened the Indians off, the only casualty being a young boy. It was a warning, however, but one that the colonists failed to heed.

With the completion of the fort Newport was now ready to return to England to report to the Company and to bring back supplies and more settlers to Jamestown. He did not have much in the holds of his ships to show the stockholders, only a little clapboard and some sassafras, but he would give glowing accounts of the possibilities that existed. He sailed, on June 22, leaving behind some 100-odd settlers with provisions for only about three or four months.

And within two months of his departure conditions in Jamestown were critical. The hot and humid summer weather brought out the malaria-carrying mosquitoes, and drinking the brackish river water brought other miseries and disorders. "Our men were destroyed with cruel diseases as swellings, fluxes, burning fevers," wrote a survivor. The fort was also on the verge of starvation, due in part to Newport's six-week delay in sailing from England. As one colonist wrote, "supposing to make our passage in two months with victuall to live and the advantage of springe to worke, we were at sea 5 months, where we both spent victuall and lost the opportunity of the time and season to plant." In the communal style of living existing in the colony, all were fed from the "common kettell" now consisting of

water and barley, the latter "having fryed some 26 weeks in the ship's hold, contained as many wormes as graines." Day by day the death toll mounted, as the members of the Council continued to argue and fight among themselves, eventually deposing Wingfield as President and electing John Ratcliffe, who was no more able than his predecessor. All this bickering and backbiting led only to tragic inaction, and the only thing that relieved the pressure on the dwindling supplies was the death rate. "There were never Englishmen left in a forreigne Countrey in such miseries as we were in this new discovered Virginia," complained one survivor. The Councilors had forgotten one bit of good advice that had been given them: "Lastly and chiefly, the way to prosper and achieve good success is to make yourselves all of one mind, for the good of your country and your own..." Unfortunately, this was something the early colonists never did achieve.

But then the fall brought cool weather for the less than fifty survivors, and the Indians suddenly became friendly, bringing supplies of peas, corn, and beans. Sickness subsided, and with no fear of the natives, fowl and wildlife could be hunted safely. The spirits of the colonists rose, work was resumed on the fort, and more explorations were undertaken. On one of these John Smith, a very controversial figure who had actually been under arrest when the colonists landed, was captured by the powerful Indian chief Powhatan while exploring the Chickahominy River area. According to an account written by Smith years later, Powhatan was about to have him beheaded when the chief's daughter Pocahontas (whose name was Matoaka) saved him by cradling his head in her arms. Smith, however, was known as a braggart and liar, so whether this was fact or fiction is still being debated by historians. In any event, Powhatan released him and after that Pocahontas was a frequent visitor to the fort.

When Smith returned to Jamestown he found the Council again feuding, and he was charged with murder for having lost three men to the Indians. The timely arrival of Newport with the First Supply in January 1608, however, temporarily smoothed things over. Newport brought supplies, but not enough, and seventy new settlers, about half of whom were Gentlemen, the one type the struggling colony did not need. "They would rather explore at their leisure the wilderness," declared Smith, "than be persuaded to do anything for their own relief."

Then disaster struck. Fire swept through the tiny fort, leveling most of the buildings and destroying supplies, clothing, equipment and ammunition. Despite the severe cold and horrible suffering, the Council could not agree on how to rebuild the fort and Newport picked this time to go off on a long trip to confer with Powhatan and other Indians. It was not until April with the arrival of another ship with supplies that the fort was rebuilt. And in the meantime, spring planting had been neglected because of the discovery of "gold." What they had found, of course, was nothing but iron pyrites, "fools' gold." But everyone was now excitedly digging loading dirt in the ships. When they should have been planting corn and other crops, there was "no talke, no hope, no worke, but dig gold, wash gold, refine gold, loade gold." So Newport sailed again for England in April, his holds loaded with some clapboard and cedar longs, but mostly "fools' gold."

With no summer or fall harvest, the colonists again were on the verge of starvation. Only the kindness of Powhatan, who sent venison, corn turkeys and other supplies, carried them through the summer and early fall. The situation was still desperate, however, when in October the second Supply arrived with another

seventy settlers, including about thirty gentlemen but also "many honest, wise, and painefull workmen of every trade and profession," eight Dutchmen and Poles skilled in making pitch and tar, potash, and glass, and "Mistresse Forest Anne Burras her maide," the first women to land at Jamestown. Mrs. Forest was the wife of one of the Gentlemen on board, and Anni, only 13, was shortly married to one John Laydon, a carpenter by trade. A year later their daughter Virginia was born, the first English child born at Jamestown.

But, to the consternation of the survivors, the Second Supply brought no victuals. Consequently, Smith, who was now President, instigated rigid rules and enforced them. One of his edicts was "that he that will not work, shall not eat, except by sickness he be disabled." Now even the Gentlemen could be seen wielding axes to cut down trees, despite the blisters on the delicate hands. For the first time the colony had some organization and leadership, which with help again from the Indians carried it through the winter. "Now," wrote Smith, "wee so quietly followed our businesse, that in three moneths wee made three or foure Last of Tarre, Pitch, and Sope ashes; produced a tryall of Glasse; made Well in the Fort of excellent sweet water... built some twentie houses... recovered our Church; provided Nets and Wires for fishing... built a Blockhouse in the neck of our Isle... Thirtie or forty Acres of ground we digged and planted. Of three sowes in eightiene moneths, increased 60 and od Piggs. And weere 500 chickings brought up..." Despite all his precautions, however, when it was discovered that rats or thieves had consumed most of the stored grain supply, Smith was forced to scatter the settlers, sending some to live with the Indians, others to exist on oysters along the river. Still, they survived through the summer and it almost seemed as if the colony might at last be on a firm footing. Although the stockholders in England had certainly not reaped any profits as yet, products had been shipped home to help defray expenses, and the future could be promising.

Then came the Third Supply which almost destroyed the little settlement.

By 1609 it had become apparent to the Company officials in England that the colony had mismanaged, due to a continuously feuding Council with a constantly changing President. Consequently, a new charter was issued which among other things appointed a Lord Governor for the colony who would choose a deputy to govern for him in his absence. He could be replaced only by the parent Company and would be responsible only to it. He had absolute authority in the colony. And it was decided to send a much larger expedition to Virginia than had been sent previously. Sir Thomas Gates, the first Governor, would sail with nine ships and about 500 settlers, including women and children, as well as "six Mares and two Horses," the first such to be shipped. This time no "idle Gallants" were wanted. The Company desired skilled craftsmen only and "such as know how to plant vineyards; hunters, fishermen, and all who work in any kind of metal, men who make bricks, architects, bakers, weavers, shoemakers, sawyers, and those who spin wool – and all others, men as well as women." People of this character were not easy to obtain, however, as stories of the suffering in Virginia had spread. But London at the time had a problem of getting rid of idlers and undesirables, who were "a continual cause of dearth and famine and the very originall cause of all the Plagues that happen in this Kingdome." As a result, when Gates sailed in June he had on board many thugs, thieves, prostitutes, riffraff of all kinds, who would be of little help to the struggling settlers in Jamestown.

In August conditions at the fort were not good, but not any worse than they had been. Supplies were low, but there were few survivors to feed, about 100, so with a good harvest, help from the Indians, and the leadership of Smith, all could be well. Then seven ships with about 400 ill-prepared settlers descended on the colony. One ship had foundered in a hurricane and Gates and his subordinates had been wrecked in Bermuda. Without supplies, most of which had been spoiled by sea water in the hurricane, and their leaders, the new arrivals found the settlement unable to care for them, lacking both shelter and food. Feuding and fighting broke out anew, as the newly arrived riffraff fought over and stole food, even stripping the fields before the crops could, be harvested. In a desperate attempt to bring some order out of the chaos, the settlers were dispersed in search of food, some to the Indians, others to outlying places. This might have worked had the Indians been friendly. But, tired of being mistreated and cheated, the natives turned on the white intruders, killed many and drove the rest back to the fort. Then Smith was injured in a gunpowder explosion and sailed for England, leaving George Percy, not a strong character, in charge.

As the dark winter months came to the colony there seemed little hope that anyone could survive. Starvation and disease set in and the settlers died daily by the score. Percy called it the "Starveing Tyme." When some tried to steal from the meager supply, Percy had them executed. Others were killed by the Indians when they tried to leave the fort in search of food. "Then haveinge fedd upon horses and other beastes as long as they Lasted we weare gladd to make shifte with vermine as doggs Catts Ratts and myce" were eaten, as well as "the Bodies of the Indians they had killed." They even resorted in their misery to cannibalism among themselves. One settler "killing his wife powdered her up to eat her, for which he was burned. Many besides fed on the corpses of dead men, and one who had gotten unsatiable, out of custom to that food... was executed for it."

How many actually starved, died from disease, were killed by the Indians, or executed, will never be known. Suffice it to say that by the spring of 1610 only about sixty out of approximately 500 were still alive, living skeletons to be sure, when Gates finally arrived from Bermuda with two ships. And this had happened in a land of plenty! The river flowed with fish, the banks were lined with oysters, the swamps had frogs, and the forests teemed with fowl and deer. But there was no organization or leadership, and most of the colonists had come from the slums of London and in their ignorance were totally incapable of fending for themselves in the strange wilderness. So they suffered and died.

When Gates saw the condition of the few survivors and the fort, he was shocked. He found "the pallisadoes... tourne downe, the portes open, the gates from the hinges, the church ruined and unfrequented, empty houses... rent up and burnt, the living not hable, as they pretended, to step into the woods to gather other fire-wood; and, it is true, the Indian as fast killing without as the famine and pestilence within." It was then decided to abandon the colony. In June the survivors boarded the ships and set sail down the river. Only the timely arrival of Lord de la Warr the new governor, with 150 new settlers including several Frenchmen to cultivate the wild grape, and provisions prevented the abandonment of Jamestown.

With de la Warr's arrival the colony was given new hope and spirit. An able administrator, he immediately organized the colonists, assigned specific tasks for rebuilding the fort, and sent one ship to Bermuda for hogs. Although there would

still be rough years ahead, the most difficult times now lay behind. De la Warr was followed by Sir Thomas Dale who arrived in 1611 with "Three Ships, which brought Supplies of Men, Cattle and Hogs." Dale, a strict disciplinarian, established what amounted to martial law, executing colonists for infractions of even minor regulations. The lash was used and public whippings were, common. But it was apparently what the colony needed to survive. He recognized the disadvantages in the location of the fort, and consequently moved the main settlement farther up the river. In addition, he set up other settlements in the outlying areas. Most important, perhaps, was his realization that under the communal system where the Company owned everything and everyone was fed from the "communal kettle," there was little incentive for the individual. So he encouraged private initiative by granting three-acre plots to deserving individuals for their own use and benefit. The results were astounding. "When our people were fed out of the common store," one colonist recorded, "and laboured jointly together, glad was he who could slip from his labour, or slumber over his taske, he cared not how... neither cared they for the increase, presuming that howsoever the harvest prospered the generall store must maintaine them, so that wee reaped not so much Corne from the labours of thirtie as now three or foure doe provide for themselves." Eventually this was expanded to the "head-right" system of granting fifty acres to everyone who came or to those who brought them. With the abandonment of the communal system of living the success of the colony was almost assured.

It was also during Dale's administration that colonist John Rolfe requested permission to marry Pocahontas. Dale saw the advantages of a union between one of Powhatan's daughters and an English settler. He consented and so did Powhatan, although the wily chief was too afraid of English treachery to attend the wedding. The result was a period of almost nine years of peace with the natives at a time when the settlement desperately needed it in order to expand, develop, and prosper.

But John Rolfe was responsible for more than a period of peace. For several years the colonists had been seeking products that would assure financial success for the stockholders and the settlers. None had been discovered. Pitch, tar, timber, sassafras, and other natural products had been sent to England, but they had not been enough to defray expenses, let alone leave a profit. Glass had been manufactured at Jamestown but not successfully, and future efforts were doomed to failure. But tobacco was just then coming into popular use in Europe, and Rolfe through selection and cross-breeding produced a mild Virginia leaf which he exported to England where it was an immediate commercial success. Known variously as the "joviall weed," the "precious stink," and the "chopping herbe of hell," it was the product that saved the colony and established the agriculture basis for the development of Virginia and much of the South. By 1619 more than 40,000 pounds was being exported from the colony.

Dale was followed by other able administrators and the settlement continued to grow, although relatively hard times were experienced occasionally. The scarcity of women remained a problem for many years, leading to much abuse of the Indian maidens. Most of the women who arrived in the early years were servants, and these, according to one account, had "the best luck as in any place in the World besides, for they are no sooner on shoar than they are courted into... Matrimony." But the supply never could meet the demand. Consequently, in 1619 the Company

sent ninety young women to become wives of the settlers. These were the first of many such groups of "younge, handsome, and honestly educated maydes" sent for this purpose.

That same year a Dutch ship stopped at the little colony and exchanged twenty Negroes, including two women, for desperately needed supplies. As slavery did not then exist in the settlement either by law or custom, some authorities maintain that these people were just indentured to the Company until their cost was paid, at which time they became free settlers like everyone else. Thus it can be seen that as early as 1619 the first permanent English colony had already become in miniature what the various colonies would later become – a mixing pot of nationalities. The Dutch, Poles and Italians were brought to make glass; the French to make wine; and then the blacks.

In the meantime, the most important change of all had taken place. Although Dale's administration of martial law had probably saved the colony, this policy did not sit well in London where everyone was sensitive about the rights of Englishmen. Consequently, the Company was reorganized in 1618 under a new "Greate Charter" which abolished martial law and in its stead called for a representative legislative assembly and the establishment of individual property ownership. Thus the first legislative assembly in the New World met July 30, 1619 in the church at Jamestown. This newly created House of Burgesses, as it was called, elected by the "inhabitants" of the colony, formed the basis for our present day system of representative government, and as it is still in existence, meeting now in Richmond, it remains the oldest legislative assembly in continuous existence in the New World.

So despite all the suffering and deaths of the early years, the tragic mistakes, the incompetent leadership, England at last had a firm foothold in the New World. And a year later another colony would be started in Massachusetts.