What They Found

Any literate man interested in migrating to America could, by 1630 when thousands were pouring in, have collected a good-sized library of books and pamphlets about the land. Accounts had streamed in from Virginia since 1607. Captain John Smith had published a description of the region he named New England in 1614. The Pilgrims had sent back graphic reports since 1620, when they settled in at Plymouth. But however much an emigrant had read or heard firsthand from those who had returned, what he found in America seldom jibed with what he had expected to find.

According to William Bradford, the Pilgrims faced "a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men." With those words he created a myth that will not die. Wherever they landed along the American coast, none of the first settlers had to confront a forbidding wilderness—except in their minds. (Only later as they moved inland did they have to deal with a true wilderness.) The Indians for centuries had periodically burned over the land to make it easier to hunt game or to clear it for cultivation. John Smith's tours around Chesapeake Bay in 1607 revealed innumerable stretches of open fields, some up to two hundred acres, all cultivated by Indians. Later, coasting the New England shore, he again counted scores of Indian villages surrounded by cultivated spaces, and "many isles planted with corn." The Pilgrims, coming six years after him, landed at the foot of a hillside cleared of trees and on which they planted corn, wheat, peas, and barley the following spring.

The wild men that lurked in the forests were few in New England, for the tribes there had been devastated by smallpox caught from European fishermen. (William Cronon holds that "chicken pox seems a more likely cause," but regardless of what disease prevailed it was of European origin and "its effects are well documented.") When the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth two

of the few surviving Indians came out to greet them. Both spoke English, and in the months ahead did much to make the strangers at home in a new world. "Many ways hath their advice and endeavor been advantageous to us," one man said, "they being our first instructors for the planting of their Indian corn, by teaching us to cull out the finest seed, to observe the fittest season, to keep distance for holes and fit measure for hills, to worm it, and weed it, to prune it, and dress it as occasion requires." The Indians Virginia settlers met, perhaps eight thousand in number, were a more substantial danger, but fifteen years elapsed before the first major attack and another twenty before the second. During the peaceful intervals these Indians, too, helped to feed the colonists and taught them to adapt old customs to a new environment.

Others present in the new world also helped to ease the hardships of settling in. The first tobacco grown in Virginia came from purloined Spanish seed, and the technique of slowly drying the leaves under shaded roofs to produce a milder smoke also came from the Spanish. Contacts with the French—they founded Quebec in 1608, two years after Jamestown—were slight, but at least once, in 1630, they dropped off a consignment of goats in Boston. The Dutch had settled New Amsterdam in 1609, and their ships cruised up and down the coast, landing slaves in Virginia and provisions in New England—thirty-four sheep on one visit, thirty horses on another.

Bradford to the contrary, many settlers found an "earthly paradise" in America. The abundance of the flora and fauna was awesome. Persimmons, a fruit new to the colonists, grew like ropes of onions and "the branches very often break down by the mighty weight of the fruits." Wild strawberries carpeted many of the burned-over glades. In the spring "herrings come up in such abundance into their brooks and fords to spawn that it is almost impossible to ride through without treading on them." Huge turkeys ran in flocks of four and five hundred. Migrating ducks blotted out the sun when they rose from a pond and made

"a rushing and vibration of the air like a great storm coming through the trees." But it was one thing to be in the midst of a paradise, another to enjoy what it offered. Few of the early settlers knew how to use a gun and nearly all arrived drained of energy by the long voyage. "Though there be fish in the sea," said John Smith, "fowls in the air, and beasts in the woods, their bounds are so large, they so wild, and we so weak and ignorant, we cannot much trouble them."

Most of the colonists found the new world less strange than expected. They met no new diseases here; all those that would strike them down originated in Europe. (To help in a further but unpleasant way to make the new world less strange, the settlers brought along with their familiar diseases familiar pests —the black fly, the cockroach, the gray rat, and the seeds of weeds unknown in America.) Neither the climate nor the land differed radically from what they had known in England, or so it seemed at first. Winters were colder in New England and summers hotter in the Chesapeake region, but the variances seemed tolerable. The rolling countryside of New England resembled areas from which many had emigrated. Even the salt marshes of the Chesapeake area, filled with "infectious bogs and muddy creeks and lakes," duplicated parts of England, although admittedly "the most unsound and most unhealthy parts."

Settlers did find three things that distinguished America from England—an abundance of wood, countless fast-running streams, and limitless vacant land—each of which would have a marked effect on their everyday lives. Wood in England by the early years of the seventeenth century had become a precious commodity. Forests had vanished into planks for ships—it took over twenty-five hundred trees to build an oceangoing vessel—into charcoal to fire forges and furnaces, and into a host of other commercial enterprises, all of which inflated over 100 percent the price of firewood for the plain people. In America the settler who had shivered through a damp English winter

found a "good living for those that love good fires." A man with but "fifty acres of land may afford to give more wood for timber and fire, as good as the world yields, than many noblemen in England can afford to do." Trees provided more than warmth for the body and flames to cook by. They could be harvested. "Wood grows so fast at every man's door," one man said, "that after it has been cut down it will in seven years' time grow up again from seed to substantial firewood; and in eighteen or twenty years 'twill come to be very good board timber." The first cash crops that Jamestown and Plymouth sent home were shiploads of lumber.

The innumerable streams that rolled down from inland hills and twisted through the coastlands made distant forests accessible. The streams affected daily life in other ways. At a time when all England still sawed wood by hand, sawmills driven by waterpower proliferated up and down the coast. The streams also served as liquid highways and drew settlers into a wilderness where lay boundless miles of vacant land. Land reachable by water combined to encourage dispersion, which in turn weakened the tight hold English village life had on the early settlers. Though the colonists were wedded to their old ways of life "like a snail to his shell," wood, water, and land worked together slowly to transform the Englishman into something he did not plan on—a new breed of man.