

~~their way north toward Virginia, settled among peaceable Indians, and were surviving at nearly the time Jamestown was planted but were slaughtered in a massacre by Powhatan, an Indian chief whose name became prominent in the annals of Jamestown.~~

When and how did Jamestown get started?

It took another fifteen years and a new monarch in England to attempt colonization once again. But this time there would be a big difference: private enterprise had entered the picture. The costs of sponsoring a colony were too high for any individual, even royalty, to take on alone. In 1605, two groups of merchants, who had formed joint stock companies that combined the investments of small shareholders, petitioned King James I for the right to colonize Virginia. The first of these, the Virginia Company of London, was given a grant to southern Virginia; the second, the Plymouth Company, was granted northern Virginia. At this time, however, the name "Virginia" encompassed the entire North American continent from sea to sea. While these charters spoke loftily of spreading Christianity, the real goal remained the quest for treasure, and the charter spoke of the right to "dig, mine, and search for all Manner of Mines of Gold, Silver, and Copper."

On December 20, 1606, 104 colonists left port aboard three ships, *Susan Constant*, *Goodspeed*, and *Discovery*, under Captain John Newport. They reached Chesapeake Bay in May 1607 and founded Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in the New World.

Here again, rude facts intrude on the neat version of life in Jamestown that the schoolbooks gave us. While the difficulties faced by the first men of Jamestown were real, many of the problems were self-induced. The choice of location, for instance, was a bad one. Jamestown lay in the midst of a malarial swamp. The settlers had arrived too late to get crops planted. Many in the group were gentlemen unused to work, or their menservants, equally unaccustomed to the hard labor demanded by the harsh

task of carving out a viable colony. In a few months, fifty-one of the party were dead; some of the survivors were deserting to the Indians whose land they had invaded. In the "starving time" of 1609-10, the Jamestown settlers were in even worse straits. Crazy for food, the settlers were reduced to cannibalism, and one contemporary account tells of men "driven through insufferable hunger to eat those things which nature abhorred," raiding both English and Indian graves. In one extreme case, a man killed his wife as she slept and "fed upon her till he had clean devoured all parts saving her head."

Did Pocahontas really save John Smith's life?

This is how you learned it in school: Captain John Smith, the fearless leader of the Jamestown colony, was captured by Powhatan's Indians. Smith's head was on a stone, ready to be bashed by an Indian war ax, when Pocahontas (a nickname loosely translated as "frisky"—her real name was Matowaka), the eleven-year-old daughter of Chief Powhatan, "took his head in her arms" and begged for Smith's life. The basis for that legend is Smith's own version of events, and he was not exactly an impartial witness to history. David Beers Quinn speculates that Smith learned of Powhatan's massacre of the Lost Colonists from the chief himself, but kept this news secret in order to keep the peace with the Indians. This "execution" was actually an initiation ceremony in which Smith was received by the Indians.

One of those larger-than-life characters with mythic stature, Captain John Smith was an English adventurer whose life before Jamestown was an extraordinary one. As a soldier of fortune in the wars between the Holy Roman Empire and the Turks, he rose to captain's rank and had supposedly been held prisoner by the Turkish Pasha and sold as a slave to a young, handsome woman. After escaping, he was rewarded for his services in the war and made a "gentleman." He later became a Mediterranean privateer, returning to London in 1605 to join Bartholomew Gosnold in a new venture into Virginia.

While some large questions exist about Smith's colorful past (documented largely in his own somewhat unreliable writings), there is no doubt that he was instrumental in saving Jamestown from an early extinction. When the Jamestown party fell on hard times, Smith became a virtual military dictator, instituting a brand of martial law that helped save the colony. He became an expert forager, and was a successful Indian trader. Without the help of Powhatan's Indians, who shared food with the Englishmen, showed them how to plant local corn and yams, and introduced them to the ways of the forest, the Jamestown colonists would have perished. Yet, in a pattern that would be repeated elsewhere, the settlers eventually turned on the Indians, and fighting between the groups was frequent and fierce. Once respected by the Indians, Smith became feared by them. While he stayed in Jamestown for only two years before setting off on a voyage of exploration that provided valuable maps of the American coast as far north as New England, Smith's mark on the colony was indelible. A hero of the American past? Yes, but, like most heroes, not without flaws.

After Smith's departure, his supposed savior, Pocahontas, continued to play a role in the life of the colony. During the sporadic battles between settlers and Indians, Pocahontas, now seventeen years old, was kidnapped and held hostage by the colonists. While a prisoner, she caught the attention of the settler John Rolfe, who married the Indian princess, as one account put it, "for the good of the plantation," cementing a temporary peace with the Indians. Rolfe later took the Indian princess to London, where she was a sensation, even earning a royal audience. Renamed "Lady Rebecca" after her baptism, she died of smallpox in England.

Besides this notable marriage, Rolfe's other distinction was his role in the event that truly saved Jamestown and changed the course of American history. In 1612 he crossed Virginia tobacco with seed from a milder Jamaican leaf, and Virginia had its first viable cash crop. London soon went tobacco-mad, and in a very short space of time, tobacco was sown on every available square foot of plantable land in Virginia.

American Voices

Powhatan to John Smith, 1607:

Why will you take by force what you may have quietly by love? Why will you destroy us who supply you with food? What can you get by war? . . . In these wars, my men must sit up watching, and if a twig breaks, they all cry out 'Here comes Captain Smith!' So I must end my miserable life. Take away your guns and swords, the cause of all our jealousy, or you may all die in the same manner.

What was the House of Burgesses?

Despite the tobacco profits, controlled in London by a monopoly, Jamestown limped along near extinction. Survival remained a day-to-day affair while political intrigues back in London reshaped the colony's destiny. Virginia Company shareholders were angry that their investment was turning out to be a bust, and believed that the "Magazine," a small group of Virginia Company members who exclusively supplied the colony's provisions, were draining off profits. A series of reforms was instituted, the most important of which meant settlers could own their land, rather than just working for the Company. And the arbitrary rule of the governor was replaced by English common law.

In 1619, new management was brought to the Virginia Company, and Governor Yeardley of Virginia summoned an elected legislative assembly—the House of Burgesses—which met in Jamestown that year. (A *burgess* is a person invested with all the privileges of a citizen, and comes from the same root as the French bourgeois.) Besides the governor, there were six councilors appointed by the governor, and two elected representatives from each private estate and two from each of the Company's four estates or tracts. (Landowning males over seventeen years old were eligible to vote.) Their first meeting was cut short by an onslaught of malaria and July heat. While any decisions they made required approval of the Company in London, this was clearly the seed from which American representative government would grow.

The little assembly had a shaky beginning, from its initial malarial summer. In the first place, the House of Burgesses was not an instant solution to the serious problems still faced by the Jamestown settlers. Despite years of immigration to the new colony, Jamestown's rate of attrition during those first years was horrific. Lured by the prospect of owning land, some 6,000 settlers had been transported to Virginia by 1624. However, a census that year showed only 1,277 colonists alive. A Royal Council asked, "What has become of the five thousand missing subjects of His Majesty?"

Many of them had starved. Others had died in fierce Indian fighting, including some 350 colonists who were killed in a 1622 massacre when the Indians, fearful at the disappearance of their lands, nearly pushed the colony back into the Chesapeake Bay. Responding to the troubles at Jamestown and the mismanagement of the colony, the King revoked the Virginia Company's charter in 1624, and Virginia became a royal colony. Under the new Royal Governor, Thomas Wyatt, however, the House of Burgesses survived on an extralegal basis and would have much influence in the years ahead.

Exactly how representative that House was in those days is another question. Certainly women didn't vote. Before 1619 there were few women in Jamestown, and in that year a shipload of "ninety maidens" arrived to be presented as wives to the settlers. The going price for one of the brides: 120 pounds of tobacco as payment for their transport from England.

Ironically, in the same year that representative government took root in America, another ominous cargo of people arrived in the port of Jamestown. Like the women, these new arrivals couldn't vote, and also like the women, they brought a price. These were the first African slaves to be sold in the American colonies.

Who started the slave trade?

While everyone wants a piece of the claim to the discovery of America, there are fewer arguments over who started the slave trade. The unhappy distinction probably belongs to Portugal, where ten black Africans were taken about fifty years before

Columbus sailed. But by no means did the Portuguese enjoy a monopoly. The Spanish quickly began to import this cheap human labor to its American lands. In 1562 the English seaman John Hawkins began a direct slave trade between Guinea and the West Indies. By 1600 the Dutch and French were also caught up in the "traffick in men," and by the time those first twenty Africans arrived in Jamestown aboard a Dutch slaver, a million or more black slaves had already been brought to the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the Caribbean and South America.

Who were the Pilgrims, and what did they want?

The year after the House of Burgesses met for the first time, the Pilgrims of the *Mayflower* founded the second permanent English settlement in America. Their arrival in 1620 has always been presented as another of history's lucky accidents. But was it?

Had Christopher Jones, captain of the *Mayflower*, turned the ship when he was supposed to, the little band would have gone to its intended destination, the mouth of the Hudson, future site of New York, and a settlement within the bounds of the Virginia Company's charter and authority. Instead, the ship kept a westerly route—the result of a bribe to the captain, as London gossip had it—and in November 1620, the band of pioneers found safe harbor in Cape Cod Bay, coming ashore at the site of present-day Provincetown. Of the 102 men, women, and children aboard the small ship, fifty were so-called Pilgrims.

Here again, as it had in Queen Elizabeth's time, the Protestant Reformation played a crucial role in events. After the great split from Roman Catholicism that created the Church of England, the question of religious reform continued heatedly in England. Many English remained Catholic. Others felt that the Church of England was too "popish" and wished to push it further away from Rome—to "purify" it—so they were called Puritans. But even among Puritans strong differences existed, and there were those who thought the Church of England too corrupt. They wanted autonomy for their congregations; and wished to separate from the Anglican church. This sect of Separatists—viewed in its day the same way extremist religious cults are

thought of in our time—went too far for the taste of the authorities, and they were either forced underground or out of England.

A small band of Separatists, now called Pilgrims, went to Leyden, Holland, where their reformist ideas were accepted. But cut off from their English traditions, the group decided on another course, a fresh start in the English lands in America. With the permission of the Virginia Company and the backing of London merchants who charged handsome interest on the loans they made, the Pilgrims sailed from Plymouth in 1620. Among their number were the Pilgrim families of William Brewster, John Carver, Edward Winslow, and William Bradford. The “strangers,” or non-Pilgrim voyagers (men faithful to the Church of England, but who had signed on for the passage in the hope of owning property in the New World), included ship’s cooper John Alden and army captain Miles Standish.

What was the Mayflower Compact?

When the rough seas around Nantucket forced the ship back to Cape Cod and the group decided to land outside the bounds of the Virginia Company, the “strangers” declared that they would be free from any commands. Responding quickly to this threat of mutiny, the Pilgrim leaders composed a short statement of self-government, signed by almost all of the adult men.

This agreement, the Mayflower Compact, is rightly considered the first written constitution in North America. Cynicism about its creation, or for that matter about the House of Burgesses, is easy in hindsight. Yes, these noble-minded pioneers slaughtered Indians with little remorse, kept servants and slaves, and treated women no differently from cattle. They were imperfect men whose failings must be regarded alongside their astonishing attempt to create in America a place like none in Europe. As the historian Samuel Eliot Morison put it in *The Oxford History of the American People*, “This compact is an almost startling revelation of the capacity of Englishmen in that era for self-government. Moreover, it was a second instance of the Englishmen’s determination to live in the colonies under a rule of law.”

Despite their flaws, the early colonists taking their toddling steps toward self-rule must be contrasted with other colonies, including English colonies, in various parts of the world where the law was simply the will of the King or the church.

American Voices

From the Mayflower Compact (signed December 1620):

We whose names are under-written . . . doe by these presents solemnly and mutually in the presence of God, and one of another, covenant and combine our selves together into a civil body politick, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by vertue hearof to enacte, constitute, and frame such just and equal lawes, ordinances, acts, constitutions, and offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meete for the generall good of the Colonie, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. . . .

Did the Pilgrims really land at Plymouth Rock?

After a brief exploration of Cape Cod, the *Mayflower* group sailed on and found a broad, round harbor that they recognized from Captain John Smith’s maps as Plimoth (Plymouth). The Indians called it Patuxet. On December 16, the *Mayflower’s* passengers reached their new home. There is no mention in any historical account of Plymouth Rock, the large stone that can be seen in Plymouth today, into which the year 1620 is carved. The notion that the Pilgrims landed near the rock and carved the date is a tradition that was created at least a hundred years later, probably by some smart member of the first Plymouth Chamber of Commerce.

Like the first arrivals at Jamestown, the Pilgrims and “strangers” had come to Plymouth at a bad time to start planting a

colony. By spring, pneumonia and the privations of a hard winter had cost the lives of fifty-two of the 102 immigrants. But in March, salvation came, much as it had in Virginia, in the form of Indians, including one named Squanto, who could speak English. Who Squanto was, and how he came to speak English, are among history's unsolved mysteries. One claim is made for an Indian named Tisquantum who had been captured by an English slaver in 1615. A second is made for an Indian named Tasquantum, brought to England in 1605. Whichever he was, he moved into the house of William Bradford, governor of the Plymouth colony, and was the means of survival for the Pilgrims until his death from fever in 1622. Another Indian of great value to the Pilgrim Fathers was Samoset, a local chief who also spoke English and introduced the settlers to the grand chief of the Wampanoags, Wasamegin, better known by his title Massasoit. Under the rule of Massasoit, the Indians became loyal friends to the Pilgrims, and it was Massasoit's braves who were the invited guests to the October feast at which the Pilgrims celebrated their first harvest. For three days the colonists and their Indian allies feasted on turkey and venison, pumpkin and corn. It was the first Thanksgiving. (Thanksgiving was first officially celebrated during the Presidency of Abraham Lincoln in 1864. It became a national holiday and was moved to its November date by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.)

While life did not magically improve after that first year, the Pilgrims carved out a decent existence and, through trade with the Indians, were able to repay their debts to the London backers and even to buy out the shares that these London merchants held. Their success helped inspire an entire wave of immigration to New England that came to be known as the Great Puritan migration. From 1629 to 1642, between 14,000 and 20,000 settlers left England for the West Indies and New England, and most of these were Anglican Puritans brought over by a new joint stock company called the Massachusetts Bay Company. They came because life in England under King Charles I had grown intolerable for Puritans. Though the newcomers demonstrated a startling capacity for fighting among themselves, usually over church matters, these squabbles led to the settlement and development of early New England.

Highlights in the development of New England

- 1629 Naumkeag, later called Salem, is founded to accept first wave of 1,000 Puritan settlers.
- 1630 John Winthrop, carrying the Massachusetts Bay Charter, arrives at Naumkeag and later establishes Boston, named after England's great Puritan city. (In 1635, English High and Latin School, the first secondary school in America, is founded. The following year a college for the training of clergymen is founded at Cambridge and named Harvard after a benefactor in 1639.)
- 1634 Two hundred settlers, half of them Protestant, arrive at Chesapeake Bay and found St. Mary's, in the new colony of Maryland, granted to Cecil Calvert, Lord Baltimore, who instructs his brother, the colony's leader, to tolerate the Puritans. The so-called Catholic colony, ostensibly named for Charles I's Queen Henrietta Maria, but in fact named to honor the Virgin Mary, will have a Protestant majority from the beginning.
- 1636 Reverend Thomas Hooker leads a group into Connecticut and founds Hartford; other Connecticut towns are soon founded.
- 1636 Roger Williams, a religious zealot banished from Boston by Governor Winthrop, founds Providence, Rhode Island, preaching radical notions of separation of church and state and paying Indians for land.
- 1638 Anne Hutchinson, banished from Boston for her heretical interpretations of sermons, which drew large, enthusiastic crowds, settles near Providence and starts Portsmouth. (Newport is founded about the same time.) In 1644, Rhode Island receives a royal colonial charter.
- 1638 New Haven founded.
- 1643 New England Confederation, a loose union to settle border disputes, is formed by Connecticut, New Haven, Plymouth, and Massachusetts Bay Colony.

~~Who started New York?~~

~~The Englishmen who were quickly populating the Atlantic seaboard from the Carolinas to New England had no monopoly~~