

The Colony of Jamestown: Conceptions, Challenges, and Change

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Abstract

The economic venture of Jamestown was not the first English endeavor to colonize the New World; however, it was the first with a lasting influence. This success did not come without enormous difficulty due to the colony's grievous start, characterized by disease, hostile Native Americans, and death. Due to the prominence of challenges—location of settlement, Native American relations, inept colonists, and high death tolls—a negative connotation has persistently followed the Jamestown narrative. Previous historians focused solely on these negative implications, but modern scholars have developed a more positive perspective, arguing in favor of a larger context of the colony's eventual success and influence. Primary sources in the forms of narratives, descriptions, and official reports by key figures of the colony's inception make up over half of the documents used to reconstruct an idea of what this part of American history resembled. These sources—from the first fifteen years of the colonists' experiences—offer the best insight into the success of the Jamestown colony. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the expectations of both the Virginia Company and the colonists, while addressing the challenges of Jamestown that have detracted from the colony's legacy. Furthermore, it seeks to define the colony's success by examining the experiences of Jamestown's colonists in regards to the eventual legacy of their economy, government, and private property system. Initially, expectations of the colony's success floundered; however, reevaluating these obstacles and the changes implemented afterwards allows for a much better interpretation of Jamestown's lasting impression in American history.

Keywords: Jamestown, colonization, Virginia Company, seventeenth century, American history

Introduction

The Jamestown experiment has received many credits and criticisms throughout the years. It is celebrated as being the first successful English settlement in the New World, though this success came at an unforeseen price. The Virginia Company and the colonists had high expectations for this venture, but several challenges required a shift in the original colonization model. The colony's four main hardships—its poor location, uneasy Native American relations, the inept labor abilities of the colonists, and the incredibly high death tolls—result in harsh historical depictions. These depictions result in a bleak view of the colony's story.

Despite Jamestown's dismal reputation, the colony was able to become a model of success due to the establishment of its economy, governmental system, and property rights. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the initial setbacks of the colony that detract from its legacy and to combat this reputation by defining Jamestown's success in terms of the colonist's records. Although the colony did not meet the Virginia Company's or colonist's expectations initially, their primary visions evolved as they adapted to their environment; this evolution resulted in a change of goals and subsequent redefinition of success. In reality, the story of Jamestown is not defined by the expectations of the Company or the struggles recorded by the colonists, but rather by how

they measured their own success over a decade after its inception. Rather than focusing strictly on the earliest and most fatal encounters of the Jamestown enterprise, a broader scope is needed to affirm the colonist's successes as they themselves regarded the colony.

Primary source documents offer valuable insight into the initial efforts of English colonization.¹ Unfortunately much of the bibliographies and personal correspondence from this time period are lost; narratives, descriptions, and official reports by leaders of the colony are mostly what remain.² These sources offer valuable insight into how the colonists were able to overcome their initial setbacks, adapt to a new environment, and measure their success. The primary sources, taken from the first fifteen years of the colony's existence, form the foundation of this research. Additionally, a variety of secondary sources were used to supplement the primary accounts in order to gain a better understanding of how the colony has been viewed in the past four centuries.

Visions

It is important to note that Jamestown was not England's first attempt to colonize the New World. "England was laggard in overseas ventures," but after the success of the Spanish conquistadors, the English crown quickly followed suit in an attempt to gain an advantage over their European counterparts; however, their first venture was one of misery and loss.³ The British monarchy granted trans-Atlantic exploration in a charter to an English explorer, Sir Walter Raleigh, in 1584. The charter declared permissions for the settlers "to discover, search, find out, and view such remote, heathen and barbarous lands, countries, and territories, not actually possessed of any Christian prince, nor inhabited by Christian people."⁴ This expedition, initially a military venture funded by Raleigh, scouted for potential sites

¹ Primary sources have been updated to modern English for a smoother reading process.

² Table of contents with primary source texts and full list of important figures with brief description available in Edward Wright Haile, *Jamestown Narratives: Eyewitness Accounts of the Virginia Colony, The First Decade: 1607-1617* (Champlain, Round House, 1998), xxxviii-xxx, 42-67.

³ Kupperman, 3-4; Christopher Caldwell, "Roanoke and Jamestown, Part 1," April 11, 2017, in *A Teacher's History of the United States*. Podcast audio.

⁴ "Charter to Sir Walter Raleigh: 1584" From Yale Law School, *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*.

and eventually settled on the outer banks of modern-day North Carolina, on Roanoke Island.⁵ In 1585, the military-style base failed due to discontent with the location and lack of provisions. Another attempt to revive the colony as a permanent settlement ensued, but failed in 1590 due to the disappearance of the remaining settlers.⁶ Roanoke's only lasting impression is one of enduring mystery. Though the colony failed for a variety of reasons, it did prove that "successful colonizing required a much larger investment that any one person could command"; therefore, the expectations for Jamestown were framed differently.⁷

Despite the failure of Roanoke, the English still hoped to profit from the New World through a substantial return in silver and gold. Small-scaled, private ventures to the Americas continued into the seventeenth century, until economic crisis propelled the English to seek more profitable endeavors. After peace negotiations were arranged between the English and the Spanish in 1604, merchant backers and privateers were eager to return to oceanic trade routes.⁸ In 1606, King James I granted a charter for settlement in Virginia, and the Jamestown colony was established only two decades after the Roanoke fiasco. The charter's goal was to take "great care to not offend the naturals" by establishing trade relations with the Native Americans and to identify profitable raw materials to be sent back to England as a form of return for investors.⁹ The lessons learned from Roanoke were not lost on the English, and they realized that having one man fund an entire colonization expedition was not practical, since Raleigh's investment cost him about £40,000.¹⁰ Therefore, the Virginia Com-

⁵ James Oakes, *Of the People: A History of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 52-54.

⁶ Kathleen Donegan, *Seasons of Misery: Catastrophe and Colonial Settlement in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 57-58; Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen, *A Patriot's History of the United States: From Columbus' Great Discovery to America's Age of Enlightenment* (New York: Sentinel, 2014), 15-16.

⁷ Carl Bridenbaugh, *Jamestown 1544-1699* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁹ "Instructions given by way of advice, by us whom it hath pleased the King's majesty to appoint of the council for the intended voyage to Virginia, to be observed by those captains and company which are sent at this present to plant there (1606)," in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 21.

¹⁰ Caldwell; Haile, 9.

pany was established as a joint-stock enterprise funded by investors with hopes of eventual monetary gain in the New World.¹¹

The Company's motives stemmed from a desire to solve England's economic and social problems by increasing trade and "relieving her of a dependence upon other countries for certain necessary commodities, and relieving her congested state of population."¹² Understanding the Jamestown venture begins with the understanding of the fundamental character of the corporation as "primarily a business organization with large sums of capital invested by adventurers whose chief interest lay in the returns from the investment."¹³ The Company was not proposing to plant a new nation. They envisioned Virginia as a large-scale experiment, and the true objective behind the Company's involvement was more economic than political.¹⁴ The records of the Virginia Company reveal that one of the first matters of business was a motion to consider a justification for plantation. This document set forth some of the goals of the Company, stating that it was to "give adventurers, a clearness and satisfaction, for the justice of the action, and so encourage them, and draw on others" and demonstrate that the "state would neither fear nor be ashamed to proceed" through colonization.¹⁵ The Virginia Company intended the colony to be a self-sufficient endeavor within seven years and viewed the colonists as employees.¹⁶ The list of investors in the Company indicates that it was a national enterprise; however, since the administrative center of the Virginia Company was in London, few investors were actually on ship, and the common man was recruited into the venture with promises of a new life and monetary gain.¹⁷

¹¹ Haile, 14.

¹² Wesley Frank Craven, *Dissolution of the Virginia Company; the failure of a colonial experiment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ "A Justification for Planting Virginia. Before 1609." in Susan M. Kingsbury, ed., *The Records of the Virginia Company of London* (Washington, 1906-35), vol. 3, 1.

¹⁶ Oakes, 62.

¹⁷ David Price, *Love and Hate in Jamestown: John Smith, Pocahontas, and the Start of a New Nation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 4; Robert A. Williams Jr. *The America Indian in Western Legal Thought: The Discourse of Conquest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 202; Bridenbaugh, 7.

Aware of the need for a crew and settlers, the Virginia Company laid their plans to gather recruits, and England had a substantial number of emigrants willing to volunteer.¹⁸ Only a minor portion of England's population enjoyed a general sense of prosperity, leaving a substantial number of recruits that could be plucked from poverty and shipped off for Company profit. Popular culture had a direct influence on how these men shaped their expectations of the journey. Most of the travelers joined with visions of grandeur and dreamed of immediate wealth, expectations which stemmed in part from *Eastward Ho*, a satirical stage play written by George Chapman in 1605. In the play, a captain enlightens aspiring adventurers to the riches of the Americas, declaring that "gold is more plentiful... than copper is with us: and for as much red copper as I can bring, I'll have thrice the weight in gold."¹⁹ The captain continues that diamonds and rubies can be gathered at the Virginia seashore and that "all their dripping pans and chamber pots are pure gold." Such thoughts filled travelers' heads with high expectations. Likewise, an ode published in 1606 to celebrate the Company's awaiting fame reveals the cheerful assumptions that the Company and colonists held when embarking on their journey. Michael Drayton, a friend of an investor in the Virginia Company, wrote "Ode to the Virginian Voyage" to inspire English adventurers to colonize Virginia. Characterized by dozens of celebratory stanzas praising the expedition's impending departure and the vast fortune that awaited, Drayton's recital exemplified the Company's expectations: "And cheerfully at Sea/ Successes you still entice/ To get the Pearle and Gold/ And ours to hold/ Virginia/ Earth's only Paradise/ Where nature hath in store/ Fowl, Venison, and Fish/ And the fruitful'st Soil/ Without your Toil/ Three Harvests more/ All greater than your wish."²⁰ These exaggerated assumptions of life in the New World were adorned with tales of riches, but soon the settlers became familiar with the harsh realities of colonization.

With the promulgation of James I's charter, three cargo ships carrying just over 100 men departed Blackwell, a port just outside of London, under the leadership of Captain Christopher Newport in December 1606.²¹

¹⁸ Bridenbaugh, 8.

¹⁹ Price, 22.

²⁰ Michael Drayton, "Ode: To the Virginian Voyage (1606)" in Price, *Love and Hate in Jamestown*, 22.

²¹ Exact population numbers vary concerning the first voyage to Virginia. 104 passengers (men and boys) are accounted for in: John Smith, "The General History. The Third Book, (1612)" in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 227; Oakes, 61; Price, 15.

The exhausting voyage lasted four months, and upon their arrival in Virginia on April 29, 1607, the colonist's hope for success grew. George Percy, future governor of the colony, reported that the weary travelers "could find nothing worth speaking of but fair meadows and goodly tall trees, with such fresh waters running through those woods as I was almost ravished at the first sight thereof."²² The colonists praised the potential of Virginia and maintained hope for the success of colony. Gabriel Archer, a member of the first expedition to Jamestown, documented the initial encounters with the land, declaring that "the soil is more fertile than can be well expressed," and the surrounding areas abundant in "multitudes of fish, banks of oysters, and many great crabs."²³ Archer's declaration that "Having ended our discovery, which we hope may tend to the glory of God, His Majesty's renown, our country's profit, our own advancing, and fame to all posterity" exemplifies the colonists' high hopes for their endeavor.²⁴ William Brewster wrote in a letter that, "such a bay, a river, and a land did never the eye of man behold... Now is the King's Majesty offered the most stately, rich kingdom in the world."²⁵ Another colonist's account mirrored Brewster's praise when he stated that "we are safely arrived and planted in this country by the providence and mercy of God, which we find to be in itself most fruitful."²⁶ The first report to London depicted the colonists as thriving and described their fortification, fruitfulness of the soil, and their navigation of unfamiliar territory.²⁷ These sources show how hopeful the colonists were, and perhaps this ignorance to the coming struggles was what saved them.

Had the Company known how much Virginia would drain their time and money, Jamestown would have

²² George Percy, "Observations gathered out of a discourse of the plantation of the southern colony in Virginia by the English (1607)," in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 90-91.

²³ Gabriel Archer, "The description of the now-discovered river and country of Virginia, with the likelihood of ensuing riches by England's aid and industry (1607)," in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 119.

²⁴ Gabriel Archer, "A relation of the discovery of our river from James Fort into the main, made by Captain Cristofer Newport, and sincerely written and observed by a gentleman of the colony (1607)," in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 115.

²⁵ William Brewster, "Letter from Virginia (1607)," in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 127.

²⁶ Robert Tindall, "Letter to Prince Henry, 22 June 1607," in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 128.

²⁷ The Council in Virginia, "Letter to the Council of Virginia, 22 June 1607," in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 125.

been abandoned at the outset. Eventually, the colonists would adapt, but their visions of adventure, wealth, and glory were all too idealistic, and the colony faced many difficulties in its first fifteen years. The colonists set sail in 1606 with "pure hearts and empty heads, expecting to find riches, welcoming natives, and an easy life on the other shore."²⁸ Though the expedition was well-planned, these visions would fall disastrously short as the colonists instead met with ill-timing, violence, and unimaginable suffering.

Challenges to Vision

The royal charter granting the Virginia Company its colonial expedition set forth instructions for land settlement, stating that dutiful care was to be taken upon arrival to "make election of the strongest, most fertile and wholesome place."²⁹ These instructions characterized what the Company expected from the colony. After exploring the river outlets, the Company settled on Jamestown Island, thinking it would be an ideal spot to fortify against an attack by sea and by land.³⁰ An attack from the Spanish was a true threat at the time; therefore, the colonists took extra measures to ensure that such an attack would not topple the newly-established English presence in the New World.

The ridges of Jamestown Island were ideal for offering protection, and the river channels ran close to shore, allowing deep-draft vessels to anchor close to the settlement for ease in unloading supplies. However, the area's low-lying marshland and lack of fresh water was overlooked and caused several problems for the Company's expectations.³¹ The unhealthy geographical location featured a nearby swamp that became infested with malaria-carrying mosquitoes during the humid spring and summer seasons.³² Another challenge was the lack of fresh water; John Smith reported a well being dug in 1609, indicating that no well had been dug in 1607 and that the colonists had been "drinking the slimy and brackish water directly from the James River."³³ George Percy recorded that after the springtime, "our drink [was] cold water taken out of the River, which was at

²⁸ Price, 13.

²⁹ "Instructions given by way of advice... (1606)," in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 19.

³⁰ William Kelso, *The Buried Truth* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), 14.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Price, 48.

³³ Kelso, 115; Price, 108.

a flood very salty, at a low tide full of slime and filth.”³⁴ In addition to the poor water supply, the “sultry summers and dreary winters added their own dashes of unpleasantness to what was a decidedly disagreeable spot,” compounding the colonists’ miseries.³⁵ It soon became evident that the Company’s hopes of the most idyllic location would be dashed by the hardships to follow.

The second main challenge that thwarted the Jamestown colony was the settlers’ stubborn reluctance to engage with the Native Americans in a mutually beneficial manner. Though Jamestown was erected on Paspahegh land and archaeological evidence confirms the existence of previous inhabitants, there appeared to be no native presence when the colonists arrived.³⁶ William Strachey reported that the settlement was fortified in the providence of an American Native “great king,” conveying that “this tract or portion of land, which we call Virginia Britannia,” was in the province overseen “by the inhabitants [of]... Tsenacommacah...”³⁷ The 400 individuals from the Powhatan tribe—“an Algonquian-speaking paramount chiefdom occupying the coastal plain of Virginia from the south side of the James River north to the Rappahannock”—“assaulted the fort and surprised it” within the first month, foreshadowing their contentious relationship.³⁸ Though three days later, messengers were sent to the settlement after the attack to inform of the Chief’s desire for “[their] friendship” and that the two parties could “sow and reap in peace.”³⁹ This offer seemed promising, but future encounters between the Englishmen and Native Americans tended to be rocky.

Interactions between the Powhatan Indians and the British colonists in the early seventeenth century were predominately characterized by uneasy trade and sporadic warfare. Because of the colonists’ inability to keep the peace, they face intense historical scrutiny.⁴⁰ Despite the fact that the instructions for the Virginia Colony strictly laid out directives for colonists to befriend the Native Americans (for trading and guidance purposes), the “conflicts between the two parties often seem to have been inevitable, since the English settlers came with the intention of taking possession of expanding swaths of Indian land.”⁴¹ Since English colonization was a mercantile venture, trade was an essential part of their survival, and both the colonists and Native Americans were interested in trading commodities despite their uneasy relationship. In his account, George Percy describes the wariness that the two groups demonstrated during an initial meeting, stating, “We came to a savage town. One of the savages came running out of his house with a bow and arrows. Then I began to mistrust some villainy that he went to call some company and so betray us; we made all the haste away we could.”⁴² Henry Spelman, a colonist who arrived in 1609, described “the Indians” as “dealing deceitfully by pulling or bearing up the bottom of their baskets with their hands, so that the less corn might fill them,” and reported that “the Englishmen taking exceptions against it, and a discontentment rising upon it, the king departed.”⁴³ The hopes for peaceful coexistence were shattered when Opechancanough, the militant brother of Powhatan, attacked the settlement fifteen years after its establishment, killing almost a quarter of the colonists. One colonist observes that the “English in the meantime became thereafter more prudent in their dealings with the Indians.”⁴⁴ The Massacre of 1622 was a tipping point for the colonists; many believed that the savages, “not sparing either age or sex, man, woman or child,” were untrustworthy and

³⁴ George Percy, “Observations gathered out of a discourse... (1607),” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 100.

³⁵ Warren M. Billings, *Sir William Berkeley and the Forging of Colonial Virginia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 41.

³⁶ Kelso, 14; Kupperman, 7.

³⁷ Chief Powhatan, whose name was Wahunsonacock, was the paramount ruler of the Algonquian speaking Natives in the Virginian region. William Strachey, “The History of Travel into Virginia Britannia (1612),” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 613.

³⁸ John Smith, “A True Relation of such occurrences and accidents of note as hath hap’ned in Virginia since the first planting of that colony which is now resident in the south part thereof, till the last return from thence (1608),” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 147.

³⁹ Frederic W. Gleach, *Powhatan’s World and Colonial Virginia: A Conflict of Cultures* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1997), 22; Edward Wingfield, “A Discourse of Virginia per Edward Maria Wingfield (1607)” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 184.

⁴⁰ Gleach, 10.

⁴¹ “Instructions given by way of advice... (1606),” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 21; Robert Appelbaum and John Wood Sweet, Eds. *Envisioning an English Empire: Jamestown and the Making of the North Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 9.

⁴² George Percy, “Observations gathered out of a discourse... (1607),” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 95.

⁴³ Henry Spelman, “Relation of Virginia (1609),” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 484-485.

⁴⁴ Anthony Chester, “Two Tragical Events: 1. The Seafight of Capt. Anthony Chester, 1621 2. The Indian Massacre, 1622 (1622.)” available at www.virtualjamestown.org

incapable of converting to an English way of life; subsequently, “the English and Indians in Virginia [became] implacable enemies.”⁴⁵ These accounts confirm how hesitant both the Native Americans and the colonists were to make meaningful connections, thus hindering the initial vision of peaceful relations.

From the onset of the experiment, the Company expected the colony to “produce their own food, trade with the natives, and send back home a variety of vendible commodities, some exotic, other of their own manufacture.”⁴⁶ As a result, investors’ return in the Virginia Company relied mainly on the hope that colonists would extract a rich commodity—either by mining precious minerals or natural resources, establishing trade relations within the Americas, or finding a better route of passage to eastern trades.⁴⁷ With no clear idea as to what would be available in the New World, these expectations proved to be incredibly difficult to fulfill, especially when added to the distrust of the Native Americans and the fact that some of the colonists refused to work, even to save their own lives.⁴⁸ The slothfulness of the colonists contributed to the decline of the colony. Few of the men had been trained to work in a skilled labor (e.g., carpentry, blacksmithery, sailing, bricklaying, etc.), and about one-third of the men who participated in the first venture were “gentlemen,” that is, upper-middle class English citizens who had bought shares within the Company and hoped to build an estate in the New World.⁴⁹ Gentlemen had no expectation of manual labor and assumed the locals would be the primary suppliers of food.⁵⁰ Inasmuch, history paints them as incompetent in areas of survival and accomplishing little in the way of agricultural and mechanical labor.⁵¹ To put the colonists’ aversion to labor into a seventeenth-century context, the meaning of the term “gentleman” is defined

by the 1605 play *Eastward Ho*: “do nothing; be like a gentleman, be idle; the curse of man is labor.”⁵²

During the first expedition, the three ships were packed full of supplies intended to support the colonists until crops were planted and harvested.⁵³ This plan, however, was foiled when much of the supplies were depleted during the lengthy journey across the Atlantic.⁵⁴ Additionally, two months after arriving in the New World, Captain Newport set sail back to England with sellable commodities gathered, along with most of the colony’s workforce, further crippling the venture.⁵⁵ “Rational men would have recognized it as a signal to set up their own effort,” such as gathering food and building shelter; instead, all work stopped.⁵⁶ The men expected the Native American population to provide sustenance, initially believing that trade, not agriculture, would sustain them until Newport’s return with supplies.

Many primary accounts complain that the gentlemen would rather wallow in laziness than participate in manual labor for the betterment of the colony. Englishmen were not accustomed to working, and although the Company sent skilled laborers, such as tailors, carpenters, goldsmiths, and a perfumer, the gentlemen’s laziness complicated the venture.⁵⁷ “They would rather starve and rot in idleness,” unwilling to put in the work for their own survival.⁵⁸ John Smith, returning to Jamestown in September 1608 from exploring the Chesapeake area, wrote to the Company in disgust, criticizing the worthless men who freeloaded off the colony and pleading, “When you send again I entreat you rather send but thirty carpenters, husbandmen, gardeners, fishermen, blacksmiths, masons, and diggers up of trees, roots, well provided, rather than a thousand of such

⁴⁵ Edward Waterhouse, *Powhatan Empire Strikes Back at Expanding Virginia Colony, 1622* “Declaration of the state of the Colony and Affaires in Virginia (1622)” in Karen Kupperman, *Major Problems in American Colonial History: Documents and Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2013), 72; Oakes, 67.

⁴⁶ Bridenbaugh, 26.

⁴⁷ Craven, 28-29; Kupperman, *Jamestown Project*, 212.

⁴⁸ Price, 4.

⁴⁹ William C. Pendleton, *History of Tazewell County and Southwest Virginia, 1748-1920* (Johnson City: Overmountain Press, 1989), 111-112.

⁵⁰ Oakes, 62.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁵² George Chapman, “Eastward Ho (1605)” in Price, *Love and Hate in Jamestown*, 4.

⁵³ Tony Williams, *The Jamestown Experiment: The Remarkable Story of the Enterprising Colony and the Unexpected Results that Shaped America* (Naperville, Sourcebooks, 2011), 34.

⁵⁴ Benjamin Wooley, *Savage Kingdom: The True Story of Jamestown, 1607, and the Settlement of America* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007), 101-102.

⁵⁵ George Percy, “Observations gathered out of a discourse... (1607)” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 98

⁵⁶ Price, 47.

⁵⁷ Oakes, 62.

⁵⁸ John Smith, “A True Relation... (1608),” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 149.

as we have. For except we be able both to lodge them and feed them, the most will consume with want of necessaries before they can be good for anything.”⁵⁹

Another account, written to inform London of the colony’s status in 1610, revealed bleak news. The gentlemen still demonstrated “idleness and bestial sloth...even to their own ruin, like men almost desperate of all supply, so conscious, and guilty they were to themselves of their own demerit, and laziness”⁶⁰ Ill-prepared for the harsh reality of colonization, “they took little if any thought for the future, and as a result, many of them perished.”⁶¹

The most potent hindrance to expectations was a direct consequence of the other three challenges. Despite herculean efforts to discourage viewing Virginia as a death trap, records reveal the catastrophic death rates, caused by both psychological and physical factors.⁶² The Company, surveying the damage, decided that the best solution was to send more settlers. After that, the numbers tell the story. From the beginning of the venture in 1606 to the spring of 1624, the Company sent 7,289 immigrants to Jamestown; of those, 6,040 died, meaning that for every one person that lived, six did not.⁶³ Several factors contributed to the death toll. As mentioned before, the colonists did not dig a well until two years after their arrival, and instead drank the salty water of the James River and with it, the water’s pathogens.⁶⁴ Native American attacks also contributed; the Massacre of 1622 had the severest impact on the colony, claiming an estimated 347 lives.⁶⁵ Additionally, the colonists arrived too late to plant crops, which only compounded their agricultural woes. One report notes that even after the first supply ship arrived, “hunger and sickness [did] not [permit] any great matters to

⁵⁹ John Smith, *The Copy of a Letter sent to the Treasurer and Council of Virginia from Captain Smith, then president of Virginia*, “The General History. The Third Book, (1612)” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 290.

⁶⁰ Virginia Company of London, *A True and Sincere Declaration of the Purpose and End of the Plantation Begun in Virginia* (1609). available at www.virtualjamestown.org

⁶¹ Bridenbaugh, 34.

⁶² Stephen Adams, *The best and worst country in the world: perspectives on the early Virginia landscape*. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 156; Karen Kupperman, “Apathy and Death in Early Jamestown,” *The Journal of American History* 66, no. 1 (1979), 24.

⁶³ Bridenbaugh, 45. A full list of immigration and population numbers comparison from 1607 -1640 available in: Oakes, 63.

⁶⁴ Oakes, 62; Price, 48-49.

⁶⁵ Adams, 52; Oakes, 63.

be done that [first] year.”⁶⁶ Finally, the idleness of the colonists led to ruin in two ways: sickness and poor survival instinct.⁶⁷ Ralph Hamor, concurring with Smith’s evaluation of the colonists, recounted that they were “no more sensible than beasts [and] would rather starve in idleness (witness their former proceedings) than feast in labor.”⁶⁸ Recognizing these mistakes, Smith quickly implemented a strict policy of work, declaring “that he that will not work shall not eat (except by sickness he be disabled).”⁶⁹

The food supply from the initial crossing offered enough provision to ward off starvation and vitamin deficiencies for the first summer.⁷⁰ George Percy’s journal reveals how the colonists at first died sporadically, then—as malnutrition and disease set in—died in droves. By the fall of 1607, half of the original 100 colonists had perished. Percy writes,

“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.”⁷¹

The first two winters were extremely difficult for the colonists; the third, even more detrimental. Percy, assuming control as after John Smith was forced to return to England after a gunpowder incident in October 1609, witnessed the horrors unfold. He writes of the “sharpness of hunger” that overtook the colony, stating that “all of us

⁶⁶ The Ancient Planters of Virginia, “A Brief Declaration of the plantation of Virginia during the first twelve years, when Sir Thomas Smith was governor of the Company, and down to this present time (1619),” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 894.

⁶⁷ Kupperman, “Apathy and Death in Early Jamestown,” 27.

⁶⁸ Ralph Hamor, “A True Discourse of the Present Estate of Virginia, and the Success of the Affairs there till the 18 of June, 1614; together with a Relation of the Several English Towns and Forts, the assured Hopes of that Country, and the Peace concluded with the Indians; the Christening of Powhattan’s Daughter, and her Marriage with an Englishman (1614),” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 800.

⁶⁹ John Smith, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles* (London: I. D. and I. H., 1632).

⁷⁰ Carville Earle, “Environment, disease and mortality in early Virginia,” *Journal of Historical Geography*, 5, 4 (1979), 368.

⁷¹ Each of Percy’s descriptions are characteristics of typhoid, dysentery, and salt poisoning. George Percy, “Observations gathered out of a discourse... (1607),” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 99-100; Earle, 368.

at James Town [are] beginning to feel that sharp prick of hunger, which no man [can] truly describe but he which hath tasted the bitterness thereof.”⁷² The horrid conditions had the famished colonists eating whatever they could find, including cats, dogs, mice, venomous snakes, boots, any objects made of leather, and—pushed to extreme levels of savagery—even cannibalism.⁷³ Rather than endure more suffering, the group decided to abandon the New World and return to England.

There is no question as to the detrimental effects that the challenges had on the colony’s initial plans. The location, Native Americans, gentlemen, and death rates acted as roadblocks to the colony’s success, and all played significant roles in the shaping of the colony’s new policies. Though the Virginia Company’s vision was almost lost under the leadership of Thomas Gates in 1610⁷⁴ the colonists “stubbornly clung to Jamestown in spite of its drawbacks,” and the determination of individuals like John Smith, Lord de la Warr, and John Rolfe kept the venture afloat.⁷⁵ Despite the fact that these four challenges have trickled down through the pages of history and marred the Jamestown narrative, primary source records reveal aspects of success that transformed the colony as it adapted to combat their initial failures.

Change

Due to the harsh realities of the New World and the disappointment of unmet expectations, adaptation was necessary for the colonists’ survival. As mentioned before, there was a large influx of settlers within the first

fifteen years, creating a shift of ideals in both colonist and Company mindsets. A Jamestonian census reveals that by 1624/25, out of a population of 1,200, only an estimated 93 individuals were “Ancient Planters”—colonists who had arrived before 1616.⁷⁶ Of those 93, about 56 were from the first three waves, arriving between 1607 and 1610. Within those, only two individuals—John Laydon and John Dods—were members of the original 1606 voyage.⁷⁷ In other words, with a change of people comes a change of vision.

Since the Virginia Company invested in Jamestown as an economic venture, the colony had to profit them in some way. Because trade with the Native Americans lagged and precious minerals such as gold were nonexistent, Jamestown turned to other means of economic prosperity. Despite the uncertainty as to how the colony would earn its keep, one thing was certain: it would involve the labor of the colonists.⁷⁸ Because the colonists were sent to the New World to turn a profit and not to establish a country, records show that the colonists were not permitted to work the ground for their own future advantage until they were able to “make return of present profit.”⁷⁹ A shipment sent back to England in June 1607 contained a variety of commodities for possible economic return, including clapboard and a substance that was believed to be a sample of gold ore (which proved to be worthless).⁸⁰ Within the first years of settlement, Jamestown tried and failed to find profitable enterprise; however, “despite a record of unremitting problems, and even in the absence of any concrete hope for future success, the backers determined not to give up.”⁸¹ In an attempt to distinguish what marketable commodity would prove successful, the Virginia Company sent a handful of artisans such as goldsmiths, jewelers, brick-

⁷² George Percy, “A True Relation of the proceedings and occurrences of moment which have hap.ned in Virginia from the time Sir Thomas Gates was shipwrack’d upon the Bermudes, anno 1609, until my departure out of the country, which was in anno Domini 1612,” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 499, 505.

⁷³ George Percy, “A True Relation... (1612)” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 505-506; The Ancient Planters of Virginia, “A Brief Declaration... (1619),” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 896; Price, 128.

⁷⁴ William Strachey, “A True Reportory of the wrack and redemption of Sir Thomas Gates, knight, upon and from the Islands of the Bermudas; his coming to Virginia, and the estate of that colony then, and after under the government of Lord La Warr. July 15, 1610” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 427; Thomas J. Wertenbaker, *Virginia Under the Stuarts, 1607-1688* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1958), 16-17.

⁷⁵ Billings, 41; Kupperman, *Jamestown Project*, 250-251.

⁷⁶ Kupperman, *Jamestown Project*, 284; Kupperman, “Apathy and Death in Early Jamestown,” 24.

⁷⁷ Information based on the Jamestown muster records and list of settlers available at www.virtualjamestown.org.

⁷⁸ Thomas J. Wertenbaker, *The Planters of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1922), 29.

⁷⁹ The Ancient Planters of Virginia, “A Brief Declaration... (1619),” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 894; William Kelso, *Jamestown Rediscovery 1994-2004* (The Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, 2004), 155.

⁸⁰ Newport, Christopher. “Letter to Salisbury, 29 July 1607,” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 130; Kelso. *Jamestown Rediscovery*, 157.

⁸¹ Kupperman, *Jamestown Project*, 240.

layers, tailors, wood processors, and other craftsmen.⁸² Glass-making was introduced to the colony in 1608 and thrived for a short while under the leadership of John Smith; though it is considered to be the first manufactured product of the New World, it would soon be neglected due to the expense of production and shipment.⁸³

The colony struggled without continuous compensation from the Company or Crown, and its saving grace—tobacco—would not have been possible without the experiments of John Rolfe.⁸⁴ There was a ready market in England for tobacco, which had grown in popularity in the sixteenth century, and the tobacco trade flourished as the colony's sudden prosperity brought "new hope and determination."⁸⁵ The colonists eagerly recognized this economic boom; when tobacco first made an appearance in 1614, Ralph Hamor praised it, declaring, "whose goodness mine own experience and trail induces me to be such that no country under the sun may, or doth, afford more pleasant, sweet, and strong tobacco...even England shall acknowledge the goodness thereof."⁸⁶ In 1619, John Pory, the secretary of Virginia, would concur, stating, "All our riches for the present do consist in Tobacco."⁸⁷

The agricultural aspect of tobacco required a cultural shift in how the colonists regarded America's role. The initial purpose of the colony—to be a modest trade-based outpost—gave way to a new vision: Jamestown as a permanent undertaking intended to grow commodities that would "repay investors and boost the English economy."⁸⁸ The colony that had struggled to find a foothold,

both societally and economically, suddenly flourished. Reflecting on the prosperity that tobacco brought Virginia, Rolfe wrote,

"Seeing too many poor farmers in England work all the year, rising early and going to bed late, live penuriously, and much ado to pay their landlord's rent, besides a daily [toiling] and caring to feed themselves and families, what happiness might they enjoy in Virginia...Where they may have ground for nothing more than they can manure, reap more fruits and profits with half the labor, void of many cares and vexations."⁸⁹

The colonists themselves acknowledged their success, and the rise of tobacco assisted in the growth and stability of Jamestown's future.

The development of a marketable commodity called for the protection of private property. With the rise of tobacco and the movement toward a private enterprise, "the conception on how to create a profitable colony was changing"; therefore, a representative government was instituted to grant greater rights to the colonists and attract more settlers.⁹⁰ In the early years of Jamestown, "most property was held communally"; this public living situation with no private property arrangements proved disastrous,⁹¹ and "the experiment was admittedly short-lived." Abandoned altogether in 1609 due to a scarcity of resources and the declination of colony improvement, communal land faded, and "individual lots quickly became the norm in the colonial Chesapeake."⁹² Communal holdings were a natural way to start any enterprise, especially one of such dubious nature, and the Company assumed that this approach would help the colony thrive. However, sharing living space and supplies from a common storehouse worked terribly for Jamestown, and "by 1613 the system was modified to allow settlers small tracts of land for their own use," opening a wedge for private property.⁹³

Individuals such as Sir Edwin Sandys and his supporters recognized that the colony would never become

⁸² Kelso, *Jamestown Rediscovery*, 156-186.

⁸³ J. Broadus. Mitchell and Louise Pearson. Mitchell, *American Economic History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947), 108-109.

⁸⁴ Rolfe worked with a variety of tobacco samples from the Caribbean and South America, cultivating a new strand that would thrive in the Virginian climates. Gary M. Walton and Hugh Rockoff, *History of the American Economy* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2014), 29.

⁸⁵ John Rolfe, "A True Relation of the State of Virginia (1617)" in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 871; Wertenbaker, *The Planters of Colonial Virginia*, 25.

⁸⁶ Ralph Hamor, "A True Discourse... (1614)," in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 828.

⁸⁷ "Letter of John Pory, 1619: Secretary of Virginia, to Sir Dudley Carleton (1619)", in Lyon G. Tyler ed., *Narratives of Early Virginia 1606-1625* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), 284.

⁸⁸ Kupperman, *Jamestown Project*, 282.

⁸⁹ John Rolfe, "A True Relation... (1617)" in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 875.

⁹⁰ Kupperman, *Jamestown Project*, 284.

⁹¹ Gleach, 127.

⁹² Allan Greer, *Commons and Enclosure in the Colonization of North America*. (*American Historical Review*, 2012), 372-373; Morgan, 82.

⁹³ Mitchell and Mitchell, 49.

successful without “critical mass.”⁹⁴ Capitalizing on the abundance of space in the New World, the Company initiated a headright system—that is, the inheritable right to a tract of public land—to lure immigrants from England and boost population numbers. The island’s eastern section was quartered in twelve-acre plots for Ancient Planters.⁹⁵ Those who paid for their own or someone else’s passage to the colony and arrived after the spring of 1616 would be granted 50 acres a head, and the individuals that crossed as indentured servants would receive their land allotments after their terms of servitude were completed.⁹⁶ Headrights were not restricted to indentured servants, and if an individual brought their family along with them to the colony, an additional 50 acres of land could be granted.⁹⁷ Land, not money, was now offered as dividends on the shares in the Virginia Company.⁹⁸

The colonists recognized that, despite the economic boom, Jamestown would never be successful without the permanence of family ties. So, in order to promote both the advancement of tobacco culture and immigration, the Company created a broad-based assignment of private land ownership to attract families to the New World. Mere land would not be sufficient incentive to get (and keep) colonists in the New World; the push for “family structures to give meaning to landownership” was a new requirement.⁹⁹ The Company commenced building a successful society through the establishment of families on private lots, stating “We therefore [judge] it a Christian charity to relieve the disconsolate minds of our people there, and a special advancement to the Plantation, to tie and root the Planters minds to Virginia by the bonds of wives and children.”¹⁰⁰ The headright system continued to draw colonists, including young women, as “the company is pleased to grant unto us such share of land as is due for the transportation of so many

people which is fifty acres upon a first division, and fifty acres upon a second upon each head.”¹⁰¹

Making private property acquirable to the common man “had a salubrious effect on the owner’s sense of initiative.”¹⁰² John Rolfe reported to Sandys in 1617 that “never enjoying a firmer peace no more plenty...All men cheerfully labor about their grounds, their hearts and hands not ceasing from work”¹⁰³ Rolfe wrote Sandys again two years later, describing that, after all the Ancient Planters (longtime colonists) had acquired their allotments, they had “giveth all great content, for now knowing their own lands, they strive and are prepared to build houses and to clear their grounds ready to plant, which giveth great encouragement and the greatest hope to make the Colony flourish that ever yet happened to them.”¹⁰⁴ These sources reveal that the colonists recognized that their society had successfully overcome its past failures.

Since property could be acquired quickly in Virginia, “a new hybrid class of ‘free’ person was created: in that sense, American freedom was from its inception different from anything in England.”¹⁰⁵ A Declaration from 1620 gives insight into how the land was allocated amongst individuals and public works:

“The people are all divided into several Burroughs; each man having the shares of Land due to him set out, to hold and enjoy to him and his Heirs. The public Lands for the Company here, for the Governor there, for the College, and for each particular Burroughs, for the Ministers also, and for divers other necessary Officers, are likewise laid out by order, and bounded.”¹⁰⁶

This excerpt, in conjunction with the letters from Rolfe, reveals that the colonists cheerfully worked their own

⁹⁴ Kupperman, *Jamestown Project*, 284.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Kupperman, *Jamestown Project*, 284; Warren M. Billings, *A Little Parliament: The Virginia General Assembly in the Seventeenth Century* (Richmond: The Library of Virginia, 2004), 202.

⁹⁷ Wertenbaker, *The Planters of Colonial Virginia*, 35.

⁹⁸ Morgan, 93-97.

⁹⁹ Kupperman, *Jamestown Project*, 287.

¹⁰⁰ Virginia Company, “A Coppie of the Subscription for Maydes (1621)” in Kupperman, *Major Problems in American Colonial History*, 70-71.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Price, 189.

¹⁰³ John Rolfe, “Letter to Sir Edwin Sandys, 8 June 1617,” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 888.

¹⁰⁴ John Rolfe, “John Rolfe. A Letter to Sir Edwin Sandys. January, 1619/20” in Kingsbury, Susan M., ed., *The Records of the Virginia Company of London*, 245; Price 189.

¹⁰⁵ Appelbaum and Sweet, 287.

¹⁰⁶ His Majesties Counseil for Virginia. “A Declaration ... (1620).” in in Peter Force, ed., *Tracts and Other Papers Relating Principally to the Origin, Settlement, and Progress of the Colonies in North America, from the Discovery of the Country to the Year 1776* (Washington, D.C.: Wm. Q. Force, 1844), 3: 5.

land while also distributing portions for public good which facilitated the success of the colony. The *Declaration of the State of the Colony and Affaires in Virginia* continues by stating that the colonists, “being allotted to their content, and each in convenient distance,” were pleased with how the colony had progressed.¹⁰⁷

With the newfound success in economic and societal areas came a requirement for the establishment of a representative government. Protection of private property was one of the main reasons the colonists decided to establish a representative government. James I’s charter to the Company initially acted as Virginia’s constitution, prescribing a form of government and setting regulations that required full respect due to the precarious and uncertain nature of the expedition. However, the prearranged government proved unsuitable, and its faults caused much turmoil and disorder.¹⁰⁸ As a way to motivate the colonists, martial law was instituted as the colony’s governing body. This forced the colonists to live under an authoritarian rule without representation or basic legal rights¹⁰⁹ Colonists later complained about the enforced military discipline that suspended common English laws, claiming that the charter of 1609 gave no sanction for this harsh treatment: “we aver that the colony for the most part remained in great want and misery, under most severe and cruel laws sent over in print, and contrary to the express letter of the king I his most gracious charter, and as mercilessly executed, oftentimes without trail or judgement.”¹¹⁰ Just over a decade had passed since the Virginia Company’s first expedition to the New World. Despite the high hopes for their endeavors, many aspects of the venture had gone awry, including the establishment of punitive authoritarian rule. The Company and the colonists recognized the need for change, and the investors acted accordingly. Martial law was abolished in 1618 due to the Company’s desire for a “form of government there as may be to the greatest

benefit comfort of the people, and whereby all injustice grievance and oppression may be prevented,” and replaced by English common law.¹¹¹

In 1619, the Company instructed the colony to reform its current conditions and establish a representative government under the authority of Governor George Yeardley, a representative sent by the Company.¹¹² When Yeardley arrived at Jamestown in April 1619, he found the colonists in a desperate situation.¹¹³ Much reform was needed due to “the failures and disappointments under the leadership of Sir Thomas Smith.”¹¹⁴ Consequently, under the “Great Charter,” Yeardley declared that all those suffering under harsh public services were now freed, the cruel laws previously upheld in the colony abrogated, and the settlers “to be governed by those free laws which his Majesty’s subjects live under in England. And that they might have a hand in the governing of themselves.”¹¹⁵ The assembly was to meet yearly to discuss and ordain laws that would be beneficial for the advancement of the colony. It also organized a bicameral legislature that mirrored the English Parliament: the Governor and council were the upper house, and the Burgesses—similar to the English Commons—represented the lower.¹¹⁶ Additionally, the people were allowed to elect the two Burgesses that would represent each plantation.¹¹⁷ After organizing the meeting, the House of Burgesses—Jamestown’s new local parliamentary body—implemented important principals that would transform the colony. The first assembly met on July 30, 1619. Gathering at the “most convenient place [they] could find to sit...the [Choir] of the Church,” the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Wertenbaker, *Virginia Under the Stuarts*, 1-2.

¹⁰⁹ Implementation of these laws under Gates can be found in William Strachey’s *True Reportory*, Dales’ rule is seen in George Percy’s *True Relation* and *A Brief Description*, and De La Warr’s authority is seen after he saves the colony from abandonment in his own letter *The Relation of the Lord De-la-Ware, 1611* and in John Smith’s *Generale Historie*; Oakes, 65; Bridenbaugh, 76-77; Haile, 27-36.

¹¹⁰ The Virginia General Assembly. “The Answer of the Generall Assembly in Virginia to a Declaration of the state of the colonie in the 12 years of Sir Thomas Smiths Government, exhibited by Alderman Johnson and others (1624)” in Tyler, ed., *Narratives of Early Virginia*, 422.

¹¹¹ Bridenbaugh, 77; Price, 189.

¹¹² Wertenbaker, *Virginia Under the Stuarts*, 35-36.

¹¹³ The Virginia Assembly, “The Answer of the Generall Assembly in Virginia... (1624)” in Tyler, ed., *Narratives of Early Virginia*, 424-425.

¹¹⁴ Craven, 24-25.

¹¹⁵ “First Meeting of Virginia Assembly, Governor Yeardley Presiding July 30, 1619,” in *Celebration of 300th Anniversary: First American Legislative Assembly and the Signing of the Pilgrim’s Mayflower Compact* (New York: Sulgrave Institution, 1920), 11.

¹¹⁶ Oliver Chitwood, *Justice in Colonial Virginia* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1905), 19.

¹¹⁷ Voting excluded servant men (non-land holding), Natives that had assimilated, African slaves after their arrival in the colony in 1619, and all women. “First Meeting of Virginia Assembly...(1619),” in *Celebration of 300th Anniversary*, 11.

meeting consisted of the governor, six councilors, and twenty burgesses (two of these men, Thomas Dowse and Captain Thomas Graves, were from the second supply of settlers sent over in 1608).¹¹⁸ Dealing with matters that pertained to the wellbeing and safety of the colony, the first legislation passed measures in 1619 that dealt with a variety of issues relevant to “Indian affairs, the Church, land patents, the relations of servants and landlords, the planting of crops, general morality in Virginia, the price of tobacco, foreign trade, etc.”¹¹⁹

The creation of a representative and legislating governmental body was a milestone for the colony, bringing in more than 3,500 new settlers in the next three years, due to the prospects of better opportunities with guaranteed rights as English citizens.¹²⁰ The settlers celebrated the changes, stating that “wherein order was taken for the removing of all those grievances which formerly were suffered.”¹²¹ It was reported that upon hearing the news of the Great Charter, that “they might have a hand in the government of themselves,” the colonists’ productivity increased: “the effect of which proceedings gave such encouragement to every person here that all of them followed their particular labors with singular alacrity and industry, so that through the blessing of God upon our willing labors...our country flourished.”¹²² Another account, published in 1620 by colony members to counteract rumors of Jamestown’s unprofitability and bleakness, revealed the colonists’ high spirits in regards to their newly instated government:

“The rigor of Martial Law, wherewith before they were governed, is reduced within the limits prescribed by his Majesty: and the laudable form of Justice and government used in this Realm, established, and followed as near as may be. The Governor is so restrained to a Counsel joined with him that he can do wrong to no man, who may not have speedy remedy.”¹²³

¹¹⁸ List of those who attended the first assembly in: “Proceedings of the Virginia Assembly (1619),” in Tyler, ed., *Narratives of Early Virginia*, 248-251; Information based on the Jamestown muster records and list of settlers available at www.virtualjamestown.org.

¹¹⁹ Wertenbaker, *Virginia Under the Stuarts*, 38; Billings, *A Little Parliament*, 7.

¹²⁰ Oakes, 65.

¹²¹ The Ancient Planters of Virginia, “A Brief Declaration... (1619),” in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, 908.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 909.

¹²³ His Majesties Counseil for Virginia. “A Declaration of the State of the Colony and Affaires in Virginia. With the Names of the Adventurors, and Summes adventured in that Action (1620)” in Force, ed., 5.

Jamestown offered a new formula for success that the colonists fully recognized, presenting better opportunities for settlers to make money and greater representation under self-government.

Jamestown was the first legislative assembly in the Americas; however, this piece of its history is overlooked, holding less historical significance than the Mayflower Compact written one year later.¹²⁴ Despite history’s tendency to dwell on its faults, some do recognize Jamestown’s place; the Virginia Great Charter, as leading American historian Thomas Wertenbaker defines it, was “the very corner-stone of liberty in the colony and in all America,” and its “importance can hardly be exaggerated.”¹²⁵ The colonists recognized the good they were establishing; as the council documented, “Neither is it to be omitted, the care which hath been had here lately at home, for the reducing of all the proceedings and affaires of the Company, to an orderly course of good government and Justice.”¹²⁶ Not only the first representative government of the New World, Jamestown also successfully instituted the colonial governmental model that the British would use to govern other colonies.¹²⁷

Initially, the Company did not intend for the colony to become a permanent settlement, but as the colonists endured and adapted to each impending challenge, their visions changed. New goals were set, and the colonists met and exceeded them. Witnessing the inception of democracy on American soil, Jamestown emerged triumphant and set the stage for future American independence.

Conclusion: Looking Back and Looking Forward

The conceptions contained in the original plans for colonization met with numerous challenges, which prompted change in order to adapt to the realities of the New World. As a result, the Virginia Company implemented major alterations to cope with the troubles that Jamestown initially faced (bad timing, ill luck, and headstrong individuals). As seen previously, the initial records of the colony are characterized by distress and turmoil. Jamestown’s most remarkable achievement is that, despite its initial disadvantages, it survived. The

¹²⁴ Bridenbaugh, 76.

¹²⁵ Wertenbaker, *Virginia Under the Stuarts*, 36.

¹²⁶ His Majesties Counseil for Virginia. “A Declaration... (1620)” in Force, ed., *Tracts and Other Papers*, 6.

¹²⁷ Sara A McGill, “Jamestown,” *Jamestown* (Primary Search, 2017), 2.

colonists recognized that Jamestown was not victorious immediately, falling far short of their initial hopes. An acknowledgement of the colony's hard-earned success reads:

“After the many disasters, wherewith it pleased Almighty God to suffer...this noble Action for the planting of Virginia...It having pleased him now contrarily of his special great grace, so to blesse and prosper our late careful endeavors, as well for the repairing of all former breaches, as for supplying of the present defects, wherewith the Colony was kept down, that it hath as it were on a sudden ground to double that height, strength, plenty, and prosperity, which it had in former times attained.”¹²⁸

As Jamestown grew, the colony continued to face adversity, but was able to overcome each obstacle; as one source documented, the colonists had “their businesses carried regularly, industriously, and justly, every man knowing both his right and duty, to their general great content, and the great advancement of the Action.”¹²⁹ Eventually, the Virginia Company declared bankruptcy by 1624, and James I dissolved the Company's rule of the colony, assuming control of Virginia himself.¹³⁰ The failure of the Company did not necessitate Jamestown's failure as well; after the dissolution of the Virginia Company, the colonists noticed that they had a greater degree of freedom and enjoyed their new status, stating “yet by it we shall be in a better case and way of benefitting the Plantations, then formerly we were.”¹³¹

Numerous praises have come from these primary sources, even though they were written after the colony's initial struggles. Once the colonists had gained a foundation and established a working system, sources no longer attempted to promote individualistic betterment. Rather, as time went on, colonial records reflected a sense of community. With the successes of Jamestown's economy, government, and property rights, a new viewpoint emerged. The accomplishments of the colony as a whole—not solely on an individualistic basis—are why the sources after the first three years are much more credible when seeking accurate representation of how the colony was progressing. Understanding why the

initial colonists wrote their accounts and the conditions under which they wrote them gives vast insight into the negative historiographical connotations that have followed the Jamestown narrative; the colonists knew they had struggled with insurmountable obstacles and overcome them. For this reason, the colonists' perceptions of their own successes should certainly outweigh the initial failures faced by the first expeditions. However, first impressions are powerful, and the perceptions set forth in earlier accounts set the trend for what future historians would think of the colony.

Jamestown's reputation as a failed colony has been too often blamed on the adversity faced by the colonists. “Virginia's early history, especially as it was formulated out of complaints and unrealistic claims on all sides, has been deemed a dismal tale of failure,” yet further analysis of later primary sources reveals a thriving colony.¹³² It is true that 1607 to 1610 was a critical period for the colony; primary sources prove that life was far from easy, especially when considering the lack of records documenting the experiences of the poor, women, minorities, and slaves, experiences which would have been incredibly different from those of an educated, land-owning, white male. The colonists themselves recognized that the colony faltered in the first years of settlement; however, their writings from the 1610s onward prove that, once established, they saw their accomplishments for what they were: incredible successes. By the 1620s, the colonists were satisfied with the affairs in Virginia, and recognized the obstacles they had overcome; as the council stated it “hath been such and so great, that the Colony beginnings now to have the face and fashion of an orderly State, and such as is likely to grow and prosper.”¹³³ No other statement exemplifies the prominence of Jamestown in United States history than the words of colonial settler William Byrd II: “In the beginning, all America was Virginia.”¹³⁴ In the eyes of the colonists, Jamestown did not fail; rather, it was the first successful English settlement in the Western Hemisphere, a mantle which cements its legacy as the birthplace of the United States of America.

¹³² Kupperman. *Jamestown Project*, 327.

¹³³ His Majesties Counsil for Virginia. “A Declaration... (1620).” in Force, ed., *Tracts and Other Papers*, 3.

¹³⁴ Adams, 5.

¹²⁸ His Majesties Counsil for Virginia. “A Declaration ... (1620).” in Force, ed., *Tracts and Other Papers*, 3.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ Oakes, 65.

¹³¹ “The Discourse of the Old Company, 1625” in Tyler, ed., *Narratives of Early Virginia*, 448.

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