

The Planting of English America, 1500–1733

There is under our noses the great and ample country of Virginia; the inland whereof is found of late to be so sweet and wholesome a climate, so rich and abundant in silver mines, a better and richer country than Mexico itself.

Richard Hakluyt, 1599

Prologue: The spectacular success of the Spanish conquerors excited the cupidity and rivalry of the English and partly inspired Sir Humphrey Gilbert's ill-fated colony in Newfoundland in 1583 and Sir Walter Raleigh's luckless venture on Roanoke Island, off the North Carolina coast, in the 1580s. But England, though suffering from blighting economic and social disruptions at home, was not prepared for ambitious colonial ventures until the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and the perfection of the joint-stock company—a device that enabled “adventurers” to pool their capital. Virginia, which got off to a shaky start in 1607, was finally saved by tobacco. Launched in 1634 by Lord Baltimore as a Catholic haven, Maryland profited from Virginia's experience and assistance. In all the young colonies, people of diverse cultures—European, Native American, and African—commingled, and sometimes clashed.

A. Precarious Beginnings in Virginia

1. The Starving Time (1609)

Captain John Smith—adventurer, colonizer, explorer, author, and mapmaker—also ranks among America's first historians. Writing from England some fifteen years later, about events that he did not personally witness, he tells a tale that had come to him at second hand. What indications of modesty or lack of it are present? What pulled the settlers through?

¹Edward Arber, ed., *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith* (A. G. Bradley, 1910), vol. 2, pp. 497–499. (*The General History of Virginia by Captaine John Smith, sometymes Governour in those Countryes and Admirall of New England*. [London: Printed by I. D. and I. H. for Michael Sparkes, 1674].)

The day before Captain Smith returned for England with the ships [October 4, 1609], Captain Davis arrived in a small pinnace [light sailing vessel], with some sixteen proper men more. . . . For the savages [Indians] no sooner understood Smith was gone but they all revolted, and did spoil and murder all they encountered. . . .

Now we all found the loss of Captain Smith; yea, his greatest maligners could now curse his loss. As for corn provision and contribution from the savages, we [now] had nothing but mortal wounds, with clubs and arrows. As for our hogs, hens, goats, sheep, horses, and what lived, our commanders, officers, and savages daily consumed them. Some small proportions sometimes we tasted, till all was devoured; then swords, arms, [fowling] pieces, or anything we traded with the savages, whose cruel fingers were so often imbrued in our blood that what by their cruelty, our Governor's indiscretion, and the loss of our ships, of five hundred [persons] within six months after Captain Smith's departure there remained not past sixty men, women, and children, most miserable and poor creatures. And those were preserved for the most part by roots, herbs, acorns, walnuts, berries, now and then a little fish. They that had starch [courage] in these extremities made no small use of it; yea, [they ate] even the very skins of our horses.

Nay, so great was our famine that a savage we slew and buried, the poorer sort took him up again and ate him; and so did divers one another boiled and stewed, with roots and herbs. And one amongst the rest did kill his wife, powdered [salted] her, and had eaten part of her before it was known, for which he was executed, as he well deserved. Now whether she was better roasted, boiled, or carbonadoed [broiled], I know not; but of such a dish as powdered wife I never heard of.

This was the time which still to this day [1624] we called the starving time. It were too vile to say, and scarce to be believed, what we endured. But the occasion was our own, for want of providence, industry, and government, and not the barrenness and defect of the country, as is generally supposed. For till then in three years . . . we had never from England provisions sufficient for six months, though it seemed by the bills of loading sufficient was sent us, such a glutton is the sea, and such good fellows the mariners. We as little tasted of the great proportion sent us, as they of our want and miseries. Yet notwithstanding they ever overruled and ruled the business, though we endured all that is said, and chiefly lived on what this good country naturally afforded, yet had we been even in Paradise itself with these governors, it would not have been much better with us. Yet there were amongst us who, had they had the government as Captain Smith appointed but . . . could not maintain it, would surely have kept us from those extremities of miseries.

2. Governor William Berkeley Reports (1671)

Sir William Berkeley, a polished Oxford graduate, courtier, and playwright, was appointed governor of Virginia in 1642, when only thirty-six years of age. Conciliatory, energetic, and courageous, he served well in his early years as both administrator and military leader. He cultivated flax, cotton, rice, and silk on his own lands, and in one year sent a gift of three hundred pounds of silk to the king. In response to

²W. W. Hening, *The Statutes at Large . . . of Virginia . . .* (Richmond: Samuel Pleasants, 1823), vol. 2, pp. 514–517.