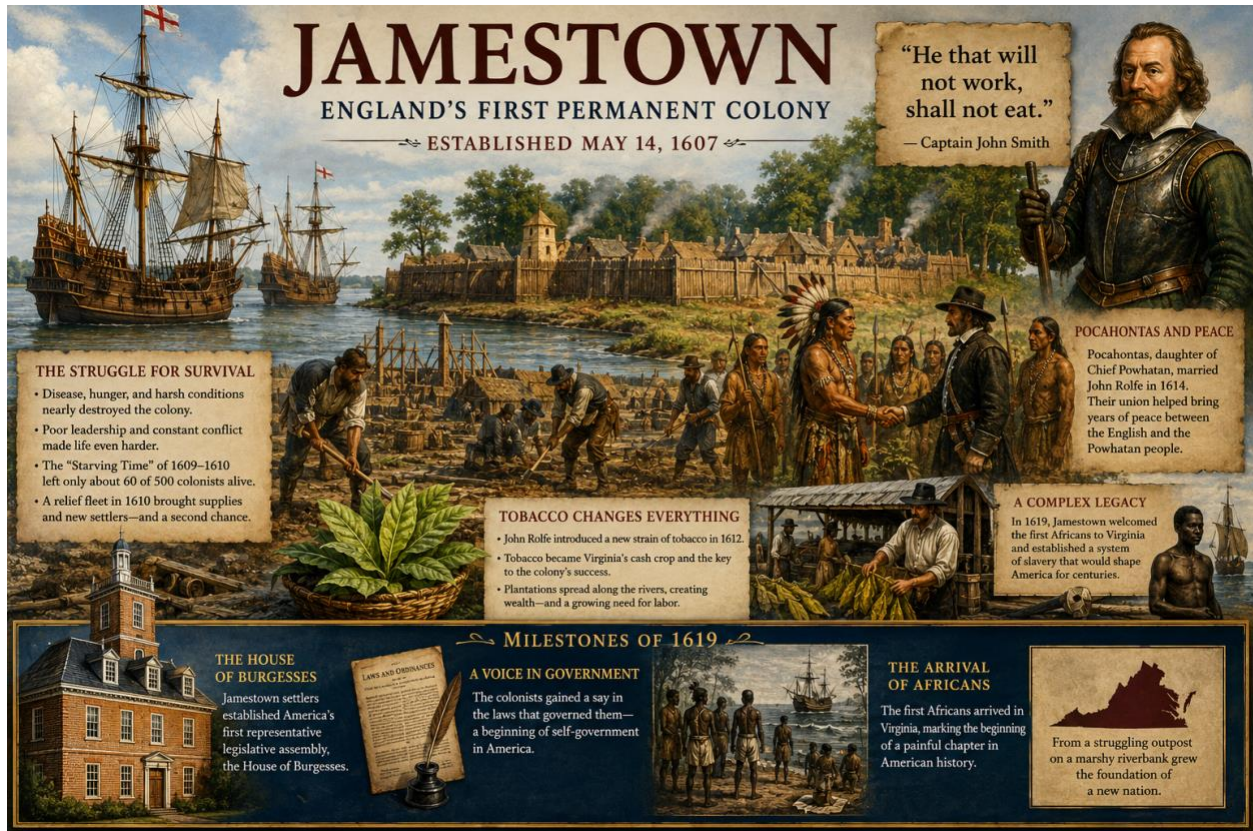




Jamestown: England's First Permanent Colony

A Fragile Beginning That Changed North America Forever

By Curtis Jerry Smothers

For nearly a century after Columbus's voyages, Spain dominated the New World, enriching itself with gold and silver from Mexico and South America. England watched with growing envy. Rather than pursuing vast empires in Central America, English investors hoped to establish permanent settlements that would expand England's influence, discover valuable natural resources, and perhaps uncover a long-sought water passage to Asia.

Those ambitions led the Virginia Company of London to finance an expedition to the Chesapeake Bay in 1607. The venture would become one of the most difficult and dangerous colonization efforts in history. Disease, starvation, poor leadership, internal dissension, and conflict with Native Americans nearly destroyed the settlement several times before it finally took root. Against extraordinary odds, Jamestown survived to become England's first permanent colony in North America and the foundation of what would eventually become the United States.

Unrealistic Expectations Meet a Harsh Reality

On May 14, 1607, the three English ships—the *Susan Constant*, *Godspeed*, and *Discovery*—anchored along the James River and established the settlement they named Jamestown in honor of King James I.

The Virginia Company instructed the colonists to spread English influence and Christianity, search for valuable minerals, and continue the quest for a northwest passage to Asia. Instead, they encountered an unforgiving environment unlike anything they had expected.

The settlement occupied low, marshy ground where fresh water mixed with tidal salt water, creating unhealthy conditions ideal for disease. Mosquitoes spread malaria, contaminated drinking water caused dysentery, and poor sanitation compounded the misery. Equally troublesome, few of the settlers possessed the practical farming, hunting, or wilderness skills necessary to survive in an unfamiliar land.

The colonists also settled within the territory of the powerful Powhatan Confederacy. Although periods of cooperation developed, mutual suspicion often erupted into violence, making survival even more difficult.

Poor Leadership and Internal Conflict

Jamestown's problems were not limited to the wilderness. Even before the settlers came ashore, disagreements among the expedition's leaders had begun to divide the colony.

Roughly one-third of the original settlers were "gentlemen" who considered manual labor beneath their social standing. While they searched for gold and dreamed of easy wealth, essential tasks such as building shelters, planting crops, and securing food were neglected. The result was disorder, resentment, and declining morale.

The colony gradually stabilized under the leadership of Captain John Smith, whose practical approach became famous in the blunt rule: "**He that will not work shall not eat.**" Smith imposed discipline, organized food-gathering expeditions, and negotiated with the Powhatans for desperately needed supplies. Although far from perfect, his leadership gave the struggling settlement its first real chance to survive.

The Starving Time

Jamestown's darkest chapter came during the winter of 1609–1610, remembered simply as **the Starving Time**. A severe drought, crop failures, disease, and deteriorating relations with the Powhatans left the settlers isolated behind their crude fortifications.

Food supplies disappeared. Horses, dogs, cats, rats, snakes, and leather goods were consumed in desperate attempts to stay alive. Historical accounts even describe isolated incidents of cannibalism among the starving colonists. Of roughly 500 settlers living at Jamestown before the winter began, only about sixty survived until spring.

The remaining colonists abandoned the settlement and sailed down the James River intending to return to England. Their departure was halted only when they encountered a relief fleet commanded by Lord De La Warr, bringing fresh supplies, additional settlers, and renewed determination. Ordered back to Jamestown, the survivors rebuilt the colony instead of abandoning it forever.

Tobacco Saves the Colony

Jamestown's long-term success came not from gold or silver but from agriculture. In 1612, John Rolfe successfully cultivated a sweeter variety of tobacco that proved enormously popular in England.

Tobacco quickly became Virginia's cash crop and transformed the struggling settlement into a profitable enterprise. Planters spread along the rivers of the Chesapeake Bay, where fertile soil and easy transportation encouraged rapid expansion. The growing demand for labor first increased the use of indentured servants and later fueled the expansion of African slavery, creating an economic and social system that would shape the South for more than two centuries.

Rolfe also married Pocahontas, daughter of Chief Powhatan, in 1614. Their marriage produced several years of relative peace between the English settlers and the Powhatan Confederacy, allowing the colony to strengthen during its critical early years.

Jamestown's Lasting Legacy

Jamestown survived because its settlers eventually abandoned dreams of instant riches and learned the difficult work of building a permanent society. The colony established England's enduring foothold in North America and demonstrated that successful colonization required farmers, craftsmen, families, and stable government—not merely adventurers searching for gold.

In 1619, Jamestown reached two historic milestones. The colony convened the **House of Burgesses**, America's first representative legislative assembly, giving settlers a voice in their own government. That same year, the first recorded Africans arrived in Virginia, marking the beginning of a system of slavery that would profoundly shape American history.

The Jamestown settlers could scarcely have imagined that their struggling outpost on a marshy Virginia river would become the birthplace of English America. Yet from this precarious beginning grew the institutions, traditions, and challenges that would ultimately give rise to the United States.