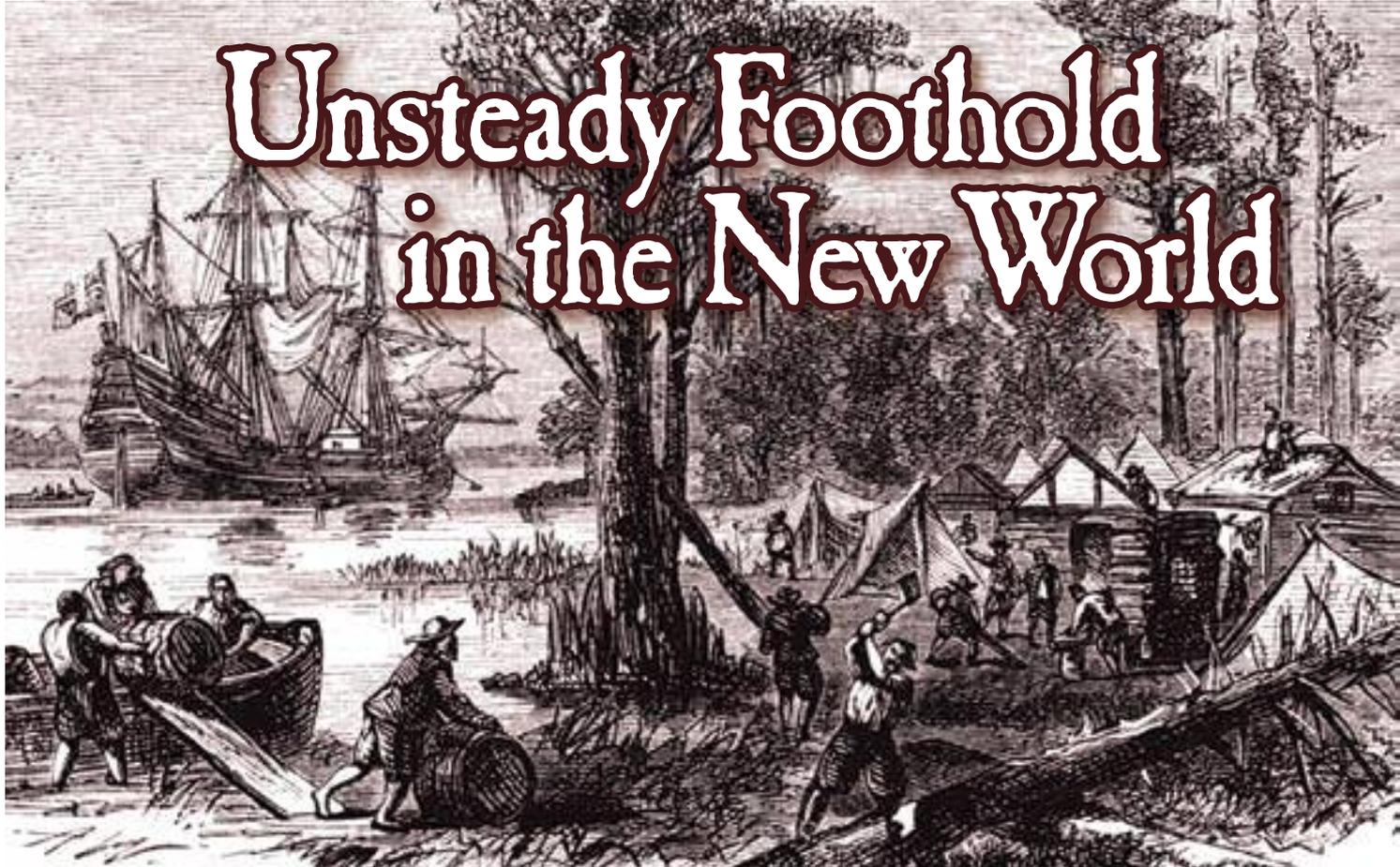


# Unsteady Foothold in the New World



Four hundred years ago, Jamestown endured hardship and near ruin before succeeding as the first permanent English settlement in America.

by Michael E. Telzow

**T**he men of the Virginia Company had been in Virginia less than 10 weeks, having settled on a marshy spit of land along the Powhatan River they called Jamestown, when things began to go badly. Two of the three ships under the command of Christopher Newport, the *Susan Constant* and the *Godspeed*, had sailed for England on June 22, 1607, taking with them most of the colony's labor force. They left behind a completed fort but with a garrison made up mostly of unmotivated "gentlemen" and a few others equally disinclined to build homes and gather food. Scant daily rations of a half a pint of barley and wheat were not enough to move them to action. Instead of building homes, many remained in tents. Rather than gather food, they waited for Newport to return from England with supplies.

To compound matters, the low marshy spit of land that they selected on account

of its defensible attributes put them at risk of malaria and dysentery — two diseases that in the 17th century were often fatal. No one had bothered to dig fresh-water wells, and the waters of the Powhatan River (later renamed the James River) became increasingly brackish as the summer months passed. By August, colonists were dying in the humid heat of peninsular Virginia at an increasingly alarming rate, victims of disease, famine, bad water, and the occasional attack from hostile native tribes. Entries in colonist George Percy's journal recorded the dismal situation in which they found themselves: "Our men were destroyed with cruell diseases such as swellings, flixes [dysentery], burning fevers and by warres, but for the most part they died of mere famine."

Their survival hung in the balance during the summer of 1607. Would Jamestown become another failed English colony like the Lost Colony of Roanoke Island, or would the men of the Virginia Company

beat the odds and establish the Crown's first permanent settlement in a hostile New World?\*

One man would step forward to deliver them from failure. His name was John Smith.

## The Passage

John Smith, soldier and adventurer, found himself at a precise moment in which few men find themselves — a turning point in history in which he was to play a pivotal role. In 1606, he managed to secure a position with the Virginia Company, due in large part to his reputation as a soldier. The merchant men of the "royal chartered joint stock company" knew that they would need good fighting men to defend the colony from Spanish incursion, and possibly even the local inhabitants. Smith was a born leader who had proven himself

\* England's European rivals, Spain and Portugal, had long since established permanent colonies in the New World.

on the battlefields of the Netherlands and Hungary, where he learned the importance of understanding the enemy's culture and methods of warfare (see the sidebar on page 37). The stock owners of the Virginia Company likely saw in him the qualities of military leadership that they knew would help sustain a fledgling colony. Yet they were not yet aware of all of his capabilities. It would be months before they would see him as more than just a hired gun.

On December 20, 1606, the 105 colonists and 39 crewmen, all men, set sail aboard the *Susan Constant*, the *Godspeed*, and the *Discovery* for a land that they were sure was inhabited by welcoming natives and filled with overflowing riches beyond belief. Most of the colonists would perish within months.

The three small ships were not made for passenger travel. Close quarters led to inevitable frustrations and ultimately fueled a feud between John Smith and Edward-Maria Wingfield. Smith, the confident soldier and commoner, refused to defer to his supposed superiors and frequently offered dissenting views about how to proceed with the expedition. Wingfield, a "gentleman" and as such Smith's superior, grew tired of the common soldier's propensity to overstep his social bounds and authority. Incensed that Smith might have the temerity to oppose his decisions, he had Smith brought up on charges of plotting a mutiny. The charge, of course, was false, but it was enough to land Smith in the brig. He was released only after the tiny flotilla reached Chesapeake Bay.

After 18 weeks at sea, they arrived in Virginia's Chesapeake Bay area on April 26, 1607. They had already lost a number of men to sickness and heat stroke, but many more would fall before the end of the summer. On May 14, Newport and his crew made their fateful mistake of selecting low marshy ground for their fort site. Yes, it was defensible against attack, but it harbored terrible summer diseases that

would cripple the tiny company of Englishmen.

Soon after landing, sealed orders from the Virginia Company were opened. Inside were listed the names of seven men who would form the governing body of the Jamestown colony. To the chagrin of the six "gentlemen" leaders, including Edward-Maria Wingfield, John Smith's name was among them. The lowly soldier who had deigned to address his superiors as an equal, the very man who was still held prisoner aboard the *Susan Constant*, had been appointed to the governing council by the Virginia Company. In addition to the naming of the governing council, the Virginia Company instructions directed the colonists "not to offend" the natives, and to remain vigilant lest the Spanish attack.

Almost immediately the next morning, Newport formed an exploration party that made its way up the river in search of

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minerals and the long sought-after eastern passage. They did not encounter any natives, which in the parlance of the day they referred to as "savages." This appellation referred more to the natives' non-Christian status than it did a disposition to war or brutality. The colonists had expected the natives to welcome them, and in fact had been surprised by an initial encounter with members of the small Kecoughtan tribe that resulted in injury to two members of the landing party days before Newport selected the permanent settlement. The



**Fortifying Jamestown:** Within a month of landing in the New World, Jamestown settlers set about constructing a palisade fort. It would be their primary protection against the on-again-off-again attacks from the local Algonquian tribes.

**Jamestown owed its success to the able John Smith. He assumed command in 1608, and the “gentlemen” of the fort who had previously eschewed physical labor as beneath them, now found themselves planting crops and building palisades. Jamestown hung on, but just barely.**

Englishmen did not know it, but that brief but violent encounter was a harbinger of things to come.

Meanwhile, the new colonists set about the tasks of providing for their own comforts and building a defensive fort. All available hands were needed and Smith was released from the brig, though he did not take his place on the council. Men chopped trees and worked on the fort. Natives made frequent visits, and not all of them were friendly. While the colonists labored at building a palisade, elements of local Indian tribes probed the defenses, occasionally killing a colonist who may have strayed too far into the surrounding woods. Gabriel Archer's diary recorded a series of

days in May during which Indians harassed the colonists, killing Eustace Clovell:

May 29. Friday the salvages gave on again, ... they shot forty arrowes, into, & about the forte.

May 30. Saterdag, we were quiet.

Sunday they came lurking in the thickets and long grasse; and a gentleman

one Eustace Clovell unarmed straggling without the fort, [they] shot 6 arrowes into him. He lyved 8 dayes, and dyed. The savages stayed not, but run away.

It must have been nerve-racking for the men of Jamestown knowing that death lay unexpectedly just beyond the palisade walls of the fort.

The early optimism and flurry of activity gave way to indolence on the part of many, most notably among the higher class. By the time Newport's ships departed for England laden with wood clapboard and a few other items, the men of Jamestown had fallen into an abyss of apathy.

Most of them expected to wait for Newport to return with supplies, or counted upon Smith and his ability to trade goods with the Indians in exchange for food. In any case, something had to be done soon or the colony would perish at the hand of an inexplicable apathy that paralyzed the majority of colonists.

Jamestown council president John Ratcliffe ordered Smith to parley with the Kecoughtans in exchange for food. He was successful beyond expectation, and his success led to further forays ever-deeper into Indian country. Smith's success in securing food from the Indians can be attributed to his facility with learning the native language and his keen interest in learning about foreign cultures. He became familiar with local tribal cultures and his written accounts of the native Virginians remain a primary source for scholars today. Smith had been successful but his luck was about to change.

## Captured

Smith's ability to work closely with the neighboring tribes placed him in a precarious position. Not only was he expected to continue to parley with the Indians for food, he was also pressured to make in-

cursions into unknown territory in search of a waterway passage to the East. It was on one such trip that he finally crossed paths with the most powerful of all Virginia Indian chiefs — Powhatan! In early December 1607, Smith and a small party rowed about 50 miles up the Chickahominy River (a tributary to the James River), passing several Indian villages along the way. When the river became narrower and shallower Smith elected to press on but only after securing two guides and a canoe from the Chickahominy Indian town of Apokant. Along with Smith went Thomas Emry and Jehu Robinson. The remainder of Smith's party remained at Apokant with Smith's admonition to remain in the boat, an instruction that they ultimately failed to follow.



**John Smith** was leading a small expedition in December 1607 when he was captured by Indians. Only the intervention of Pocahontas prevented Powhatan's executioners from killing Smith.

Smith and his party of five moved about two miles before they stopped to rest and cook a meal. Meanwhile, those left behind with instructions to stay in the boat were lured ashore by the promise of an encounter with some native women of Apokant. It was a move that one of them would not live to regret. Almost as soon as they reached the shore in anticipation of a female encounter, they were ambushed by a Chickahominy war party. All of the colonists managed to escape to the boat except George Classen, one of the few laborers left in the colony. Classen's thirst for female companionship — it had, after all, been a year since the all-male flotilla left England — led to his undoing. The warriors bound Classen, cut his fingers off with a mussel shell, and then proceeded to skin him alive, starting with his head. Before they burned him at the stake, they disemboweled him, throwing his entrails on the fire.

Smith, of course, was unaware of the events unfolding just five miles away. And in any case he was about to come face to face with a similar situation. While his men and guides were cooking a meal on the banks of the river, Smith decided to venture inland with an Indian guide for a brief exploratory jaunt. About 15 minutes into his walk, he heard shouts from the river bank. Immediately, his martial instincts took over. He placed a gun to the head of his guide, thinking that perhaps he had been betrayed, but the guide claimed ignorance and advised Smith to run. Before he could do so, an arrow struck his thigh but failed to pierce his clothing. But it did not matter. Within seconds he was surrounded by hostile natives. A few shots from his gun drove them away but the determined foe came on, and Smith, who was armed with a slow-loading matchlock, was no match for numbers of Indians brandishing quick-loading bows. His two men had been killed on the river bank, but Smith was ultimately spared when his guide convinced the attackers that the captain was a leader, earning him the privilege of being taken captive rather than killed on the spot.

Opechancanough, the leader of the war party, happened to also be one of the three younger brothers of Powhatan. He had been installed as chief of the Pamunkeys, one of the local tribes that paid tribute to

Powhatan. As a *weroance*, or leader, he wielded control over the Pamunkeys and held Smith's fate in his hands.

Opechancanough was not quite sure what to do with Smith. He could tell by

Smith's demeanor that he was a leader, and perhaps a high-ranking sort. It was one thing to skin and kill a commoner, but a leader was quite something else. There was a political dimension to the event that re-

## A Life of Adventure



Smith trading with Indians

John Smith was born in 1580, the son of a simple farmer — just one rung above “peasant” in class-conscious 16th-century England. He attended the Royal Free Grammar School of King Edward VI in Louth, England, but fantasized about running away to the continent to begin life as a mercenary soldier as early as 13 years of age. By the time he was 15, his father had apprenticed him to a merchant. Two years later, his father died, providing Smith an opportunity to abandon the mundane life of a merchant in pursuit of more exciting paths. Smith wasted no time heading to the continent in search of adventure.

Standing armies were relatively rare during the 17th century. During times of war, tem-

porary militia typically met the national demand for levies. In such circumstances an enterprising young man could find ready employment in a foreign army during the seemingly unending wars of monarchical succession and religious conflict of the time. Smith did just that, first fighting under Captain Joseph Duxbury with the Dutch in their struggle for independence from Spain. Five years later he returned to England where he began in earnest to study the art of war. He pored over military manuals, studied the biographies of Roman and Greek military heroes, and delved into the science of explosives.

By the time he returned to the continent in the summer of 1601, he had amassed a body of practical knowledge that helped him secure an enlistment with the Austrian forces in their war with the Ottoman Turks. On the battlefield his expertise with explosives earned him a captain's commission, and with that came the realization that successful soldiers could earn respect and rewards based upon merit rather than class. But in 1602, the vagaries of war caught up with Smith, and he was captured by the Turks and sold into slavery. He found himself the property of a farmer along with hundreds of other slaves. Smith would have none of human bondage however; he was too proud and valued freedom. And at the first opportunity, he made his move to secure his freedom. While being beaten by his master, Smith struck back killing the man with a farm implement. He escaped and made it back to England. Several years later he found himself at the center of a new adventure — the founding of Jamestown. ■

— MICHAEL E. TELZROW

**By 1619, 90 women were sent to become wives of the settlers. A sense of optimism had arrived, and bolstered by a new cash crop called tobacco that took Europe by storm, Jamestown entered the annals of history as the first permanent English settlement in America.**

quired consideration. Sensing that he must present Smith to Powhatan, Opechanca-nough spared the Englishman's life.

On December 30, Smith was brought to the imperial town of Werowocomoco, downstream on the York River from where he had been captured. There he became the first Englishman to set eyes on the powerful Indian chief and later described him as possessing a "grave and majesticall countenance." Watching in the wings was one of Powhatan's daughters — Matoaka, or as she was sometimes called, Pocahontas (which meant "little wanton").

Powhatan interrogated Smith, asking him why the English had come. Smith replied that the English were looking for an Eastern passage in pursuit of men who had killed one of Newport's men. It was a partial lie, but it had the effect that Smith intended. The message was clear: the English avenged the death of their people, and if Smith failed to return, more English would come armed with muskets.

Powhatan could spare Smith's life in accord with Indian custom that lent privilege to a *weroance*. Or, he could dispatch him, sending a clear message to the English to stay away and return to their homeland. He chose the latter. Smith would have his skull smashed with a war club in accordance with custom.

But what happened next altered the course of history in America. Before the executioners could do their grisly work, Pocahontas intervened with her father on Smith's behalf. Powhatan, perhaps wishing to avoid an embarrassing spectacle, acquiesced to his daughter's wishes.

Smith remained a prisoner for two days but was released with the caveat that he need only provide two large guns and a grindstone for the great chief. He left the Indian village with 12 guides knowing he owed Pocahontas his life.

### Hanging By a Thread

The colony had not fared well in Smith's absence. Without his skills at obtaining food from Indians, they continued to starve. Fifty-one had perished from disease

and starvation within the first six months. The return of Newport with supplies from England in January 1608 staved off complete ruin, but it is highly unlikely Newport would have found a single European alive if not for Captain Smith's perseverance and leadership skills. Nor would they have survived without Smith's ability to make allies with Powhatan, largely through the intercession of the great chief's daughter. Without it, Powhatan could have easily wiped out the tiny party of colonists. Their lives were in the balance, and Powhatan held the scales for the time being.

Jamestown owed its success to the confident and able John Smith. He assumed command in 1608, but even with his abilities, he found it difficult to motivate the malingeringers, whom he ordered to be "banished from the fort as a drone." The "gentlemen" of the fort who had previously eschewed physical labor as beneath them, now found themselves planting crops and building palisades. Jamestown hung on, but just barely.

Newport's supply ship had brought more than just food. It brought between 70 and 100 colonists, including two women, but it would be several years before the true fate of the colony would be settled. Smith returned to England in 1609 after suffering a gunpowder burn, and in his absence the colonists experienced the "starving time." In 1610, when Lord De La Warr arrived as governor of the colony, the settlement was in the last stages of ruin. He brought 300 men and supplies, took control, and stabilized the situation. Jamestown survived.

By 1619, 90 women were sent to become wives of the settlers. A sense of optimism had arrived, and bolstered by a new cash crop called tobacco that took Europe by storm, Jamestown entered the annals of history as the first permanent English settlement in America. ■

