A Brief History of Jamestown

The founding of Jamestown, America’s first permanent English colony, in Virginia in 1607 – 13 years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth in Massachusetts – sparked a series of events that helped shape the nation and the world. The government, language, customs, beliefs and dreams of these early Virginians are all part of the United States’ heritage today.

The colony was funded by the Virginia Company of London, a group of investors who hoped to profit from the venture. In June 1606 by King James I, granted a charter to the Virginia Company which essentially gave the company control of the new colony. The king did this because the company also supported English national goals of counterbalancing the expansion of France and Spain in the New World, seeking a northwest passage to the Orient, and converting the Virginia Indians to the Anglican religion.

The Susan Constant, Godspeed and Discovery, carrying 105 passengers, one of whom died during the voyage, departed from England in December 1606 and reached the Virginia coast in late April 1607. The expedition was led by Captain Christopher Newport. On May 13, 1607 after two weeks of exploration, the ships arrived at a site on the James River that was selected for its deep water anchorage and good defensive position. The passengers came ashore the next day, and work began on the settlement. Initially, the colony was governed by a council of seven, with one rotating member serving as president.

Serious problems soon emerged in the small English outpost, which was located in the midst of a chiefdom of about 14,000 Algonquian-speaking Indians ruled by the powerful leader Powhatan. By February 1608 relations with the Powhatan Indians were fragile, although some small trading opportunities were established. An unfamiliar climate, as well as brackish water supply and lack of food (conditions possibly aggravated by a prolonged drought) led to disease and death. Many of the original colonists were upper-class Englishmen, and the colony lacked sufficient laborers and skilled farmers.

The first two English women arrived at Jamestown in 1608, however women didn’t arrive in large numbers until 1619. Men outnumbered women, however, for most of the 17th century.

Captain John Smith became the colony’s leader in September 1608 – the fourth in a succession of rotating council presidents – and established a “no work, no food” policy. Smith had been instrumental in trading with the Powhatan Indians for food. However, in the fall of 1609 he was injured by burning gunpowder and left for England. Other Council members who were unhappy with his harsh policies were happy to see him go. Smith never returned to Virginia, but promoted colonization of North America until his death in 1631 and published numerous accounts of the Virginia colony, providing invaluable material for historians.
Smith’s exit left a lack of leadership for the English. His departure was immediately followed by the “starving time,” a period of warfare between the colonists and Indians and the deaths of many English men and women from starvation and disease. This lasted from late 1609 until late 1610. Just when the colonists decided to abandon Jamestown in the Spring of 1610, settlers with supplies arrived from England, eager to find wealth in Virginia. This group of new settlers arrived with new orders from King James I. His orders provided for stronger leadership under a governor who served with a group of advisors, and the introduction of a period of military law that carried harsh punishments for those who did not obey.

In order to make a profit for the Virginia Company, settlers tried a number of small industries, after 1610 including glassmaking, wood production, and pitch and tar manufacture. However, until the introduction of tobacco as a cash crop about 1613 by colonist John Rolfe (who later married Powhatan’s daughter Pocahontas) none of the colonists’ efforts to establish profitable enterprises were successful. Tobacco cultivation required large amounts of land and labor and stimulated the rapid growth of the Virginia colony. Finally the British were making money in Jamestown. Europe was getting addicted to tobacco and demand was skyrocketing. Settlers moved in droves to the Virginia colony. They settled onto large plots of lands needed to grow the cash crop. These lands were occupied by the Powhatan Indians which increased tensions. Tobacco also increased the numbers of indentured servants coming to Virginia.

The first documented Africans in Virginia arrived in 1619. They were from the kingdom of Ndongo in Angola, West Central Africa, and had been captured during war with the Portuguese. While these first Africans may have been treated as indentured servants, that practice fades away. The customary practice of owning Africans as slaves for life appeared in the mid-1600s. The number of African slaves increased significantly in the second half of the 1600s, replacing indentured servants as the primary source of labor.

The first representative government in British America began at Jamestown in 1619 with the convening of a general assembly, at the request of settlers who wanted input in the laws governing them. This assembly is known as the House of Burgesses and is the first democratic form of government in America. After a series of events, including a 1622 war with the Powhatan Indians and misconduct among some of the Virginia Company leaders in England, the Virginia Company was dissolved by the king in 1624, and Virginia became a royal colony. Now the colony was ruled directly by the King. Jamestown continued as the center of Virginia’s political and social life until 1699 when the seat of government moved to Williamsburg. Williamsburg grows and Jamestown is absorbed by it and thus ceased to exist as a town by the mid-1700s. Jamestown’s legacies are embodied in today’s United States.