

Early Jamestown: Why Did So Many Colonists Die?

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In the spring of 1607, three English ships carrying more than 100 passengers sailed into the mouth of **Chesapeake Bay** and worked their way up the James River. Hopes were high, and with good reason. This was to be the first permanent English settlement in the New World. A strong group of English investors stood behind the enterprise. The King of England, James I, had given the colonizers his blessing. Along the river banks one could see freshwater streams, “faire meddowes and goodly tall trees.” Ahead lay possible riches, a native population to be taught the ways of Jesus Christ, and maybe even a hidden trade route to China!

True, there were dangers. A Spanish warship or two would not be a surprise. Also, the English had experienced a recent failure on nearby Roanoke Island. In fact all the Roanoke colonists had mysteriously disappeared. But in 1607, these were acceptable risks.

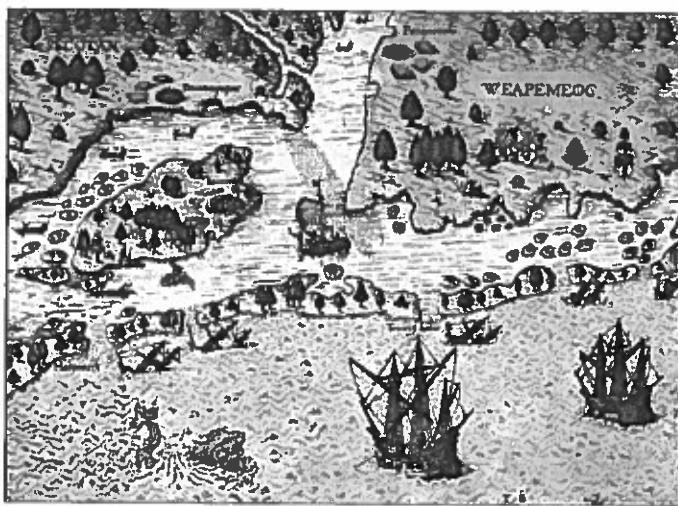
What was probably more important is that the “faire meddowes and goodly tall trees” of the Chesapeake were not empty. Some 15,000 **Powhatan** Indians lived in small villages along and around the James River. They were loosely ruled by a great chief named **Wahunsonacock**. One of Wahunsonacock’s daughters was the fabled Pocahontas, a very real person who would one day marry an Englishman and sail to England.

When the English settlers arrived they built a fort on a place they called James Island. This was to become Jamestown. Of the 110 original

settlers, only 40 would be alive at the end of December. The arrival in January of a resupply ship saved the colony from total collapse, but in the next two years, hard times continued. Captain John Smith who had provided much needed leadership was sent back to England. Then, in the awful winter of 1609-1610, two-thirds of the settlement died.

Remarkably, the English kept coming – men, women, and children. The vast majority were young (17 to 35) and most were poor.

They hoped to work off their debt and, one day, own a piece of land. A few arrived with money, and some would one day find success growing tobacco. But for most there was no happy ending. By 1611, of the more than 500 settlers who had arrived at Jamestown, 80% were dead.



Roanoke: Arrival, 1590. The Granger Collection, New York

It is truly amazing that the colony survived. Those English, both in Jamestown and back in the mother country, were a determined bunch. Our focus, however, is not on the survival, but on the near destruction. In a Mini-Q, five documents can only tell part of the story but that is the challenge. Examine the documents that follow and do your best to answer the question: *Early Jamestown: Why did so many colonists die?*