

What Happened at Jamestown?

More than a few myths surround the history of America's ill-fated first settlement.



A PORTRAIT OF POCAHONTAS HANGS IN THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY IN WASHINGTON, D.C. THE NOTION THAT SHE THREW HER BODY IN FRONT OF CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH TO SAVE HIS LIFE IS CONSIDERED SUSPECT BY MANY SCHOLARS, AS ARE OTHER LEGENDS SURROUNDING THE FAMOUS NATIVE AMERICAN GIRL.

THE STORIES OF THE FIRST PERMANENT ENGLISH settlement in America—Jamestown—have often been subject to some “stretchers,” as Mark Twain’s *Huck Finn* would call them. Disney’s 1995 animated hit *Pocahontas*, for example, would have us believe that the daughter of the American Indian Chief Powhatan married the dashing Captain John Smith of Jamestown, whereas in truth she married farmer John Rolfe of the settlement, who has the dubious distinction of being the first to export tobacco and was by all reports an “ardent smoker.” Who was Pocahontas, then? What was life really like at Jamestown? And why did so many of the settlers die there in its early years?

Four hundred years after Europeans set their first permanent stakes in the New World, new evidence has undermined some assumptions about the first settlement. Of the 105 people who survived the five months at sea to arrive at “James’ Towne” (named after the presiding English king James I) on May 13, 1607, only 38 of them remained alive after eight months. And when 400 new colonists arrived in the winter of 1609, there was so little food in storage that all but 60 died by spring. Scholars, using written

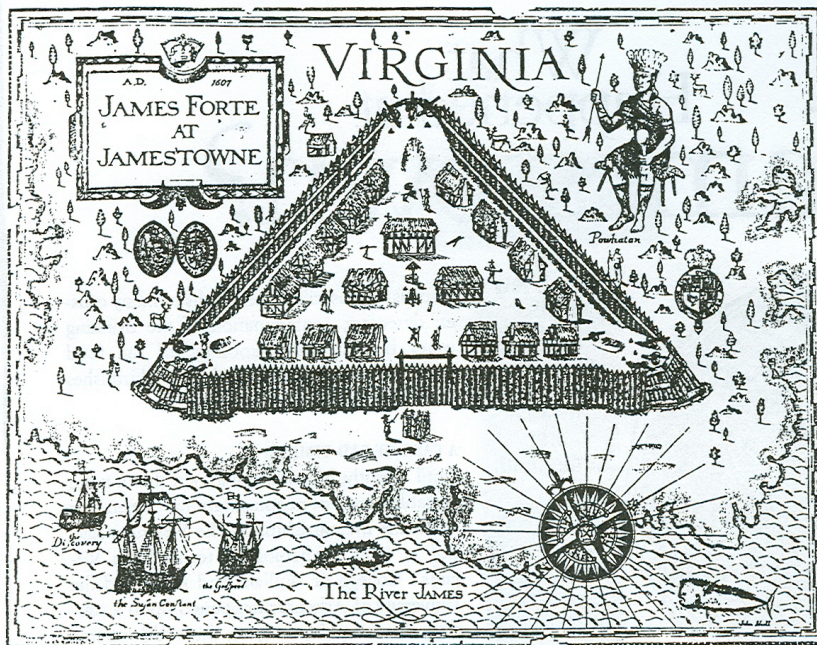
records, had ascribed the deaths to many causes: dysentery, contamination of the drinking water by salt water, spoilage of the food brought from England, and early skirmishes with the local Algonquian Indians.

A CASE OF BAD TIMING?

Until recently, historians assumed that a more versatile bunch of people might have been able to endure the hardships on the Virginia coast. But in 1998, archeological teams from Virginia’s College of William and Mary and the University of Arkansas happened upon a startling discovery. In studying the width of tree rings of ancient bald cypress trees in southeastern Virginia, some of which date as far back as the 11th century, the scientists saw that from 1587 to 1589 there was a drought more extreme than any in the preceding 800 years. The years 1606 to 1612 accounted for the driest seven-year period in 770 years. No matter what the skill of the men involved, the climate at Jamestown would have presented difficulties in those early years. “If the English had tried to find a worse time to launch their settlements in the New World, they could not have done so,” said Dennis Blanton, who directed the study.

In September 1996, a team of archeologists led by William Kelso announced the discovery of the remains of James Fort—built in 1607 to defend Jamestown—which was thought swallowed by the James River centuries ago. Perhaps the most fascinating discovery was the body of a young European male in his 20s, buried within the fort, with a musket ball lodged in a lower leg and a hole in his shoulder blade, suggesting gunshot wounds. As the local Indian population had limited access to guns (though they did acquire them through trading), the wounds suggest the man could have been shot by another settler.

Could there have been a revolt within the fort because of the drought and scarcity of



A VIEW OF JAMES FORT AT JAMESTOWN. THE REMAINS OF THE FORT, WHICH WAS CONSTRUCTED IN 1607, WERE DISCOVERED IN 1996. THE FORT WAS THOUGHT TO HAVE BEEN SWALLOWED BY THE NEARBY JAMES RIVER, BUT MOST OF THE FORT WAS FOUND STILL ON DRY LAND.

food? Such a finding would undermine the picture of peaceful cooperation amid terrible hardship that the settlers wanted to paint for the Virginia Company, the group of investors back in England who financed the venture.

THE INDIAN "PRINCESS"

Will the new finds be able to tell us any more about Pocahontas? Captain John Smith, who led Jamestown in its difficult early years, wrote that in December 1607 he was captured and forced to stretch out on two large, flat stones, with Indians standing over him with clubs. Then Pocahontas rushed in, took Smith's head in her arms, and "hazarded the beating out of her owne braines to save mine."

Some historians doubt the veracity of the story, as it was written some 16 years after the event; Smith made no mention of it in previous correspondence. Others wonder whether the scene could have been a set-up, intended to make Smith believe his life was spared, thereby tempering his attitude toward the natives.

Regardless, while still a little girl, Pocahontas would deliver messages from her father to Jamestown, bringing furs, hatchets, and trinkets to trade. When the boys of the colony



would spin cartwheels, "she would follow and wheel some herself, naked as she was all the fort over." But any romantic interest with John Smith, as storytellers would have it, is unlikely; he left the colony while she was still a girl of 14.

Only later, when taken as a hostage by the British and held for ransom, did Pocahontas meet tobacco farmer John Rolfe. Rolfe was piously religious, and struggled with the idea of interracial marriage. But his love for Pocahontas triumphed, and the marriage went forward, bringing a period of peace between the two populations. Pocahontas became Rebecca, had a son whose ancestry survives today, and braved a voyage to England, where she died of pneumonia or tuberculosis at 22.

THIS 19TH CENTURY LITHOGRAPH RECREATES THE MARRIAGE OF POCAHONTAS, THE DAUGHTER OF NATIVE AMERICAN CHIEF POWHATAN, TO BRITISH TOBACCO FARMER JOHN ROLFE IN APRIL, 1614. AFTER GIVING BIRTH TO A SON, POCAHONTAS DIED AT THE AGE OF 22.