

The New World: Jamestown and the "Starving Time"

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Jamestown was the first permanent English settlement in America. This painting was done by National Park Service artist Sydney King. Photo from: MPI/Getty Images.

The first investment group to launch a lasting venture to North America was the Virginia Company of London. The investors had one goal in mind: gold. They hoped to repeat the success of the Spaniards. The Spanish were enriching their empire with the precious metal from the Americas.



Britain's King James I granted the Virginia Company a private charter. This gave the company permission to set up a colony in the New World. Individuals invested in the Virginia Company to help fund the trip and the settlement. They hoped to receive a huge profit in return.

144 English Men And Boys

So the Virginia Company sent a small group of settlers across the Atlantic Ocean. In 1607, 144 English men and boys established the Jamestown colony. Located in what is the state of Virginia today, it was named for King James.

The colonists were told that they had to generate wealth. If they failed, financial support for their efforts would end. Many of the men spent their days searching for gold. However, there was little to be found in the area.

As a consequence, the colonists spent little time farming. Food supplies dwindled and ran out. Malaria sickened many, and the harsh winter made life all the harder. After the first year, only 38 of the original 144 settlers had survived.

Leadership From John Smith

The colony may well have perished had it not been for the tough leadership of John Smith. Smith imposed strict discipline on the colonists. "Work or starve" was his motto. Each colonist was required to spend four hours per day doing farm work.

An accident left Smith with a bad burn and forced him to return to England in 1609. After his departure, the colony endured even more suffering. A new boatload of colonists and supplies sank off the coast of Bermuda. It had been on its way to relieve the hungry settlement. The winter of 1609-10 was remembered as the "Starving Time." This may have been the worst period of all.

Disease and hunger ravaged Jamestown. Two desperate colonists were tied to posts and left to starve as punishment for raiding the colonies' stores. One colonist even took to cannibalism, eating his own wife. The fate of the venture hung in the balance. More colonists arrived, including women. However, few had the farming experience or other skills the colony needed.



Bankrupted Colony Falls Under Crown's Rule

Jamestown attempted to grow tobacco, a valuable cash crop. Still, the colony continued to fail financially. Finally, King James declared the Virginia Company bankrupt in 1624.

Investors lost some 200,000 British pounds in Jamestown, a large fortune at the time. The private charter was repealed, and Virginia became a royal colony, the first in America to be ruled by the Crown.

Settlements At Great Cost

Investments in permanent settlements were risky indeed. Investors paid with their pocketbooks, while many colonists paid with their lives. For every six colonists who ventured across the Atlantic, only one survived.

Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from "English Men And Boys" that explains what happened because the colonists spent most of their time searching for gold.

- 2 Based on information in the article, which of these statements is TRUE?
 - (A) Virginia became a royal colony because Jamestown could not grow tobacco.
 - (B) Virginia became a royal colony because the colonists in Jamestown found gold.
 - (C) Virginia became a royal colony because the Virginia Company failed financially.
 - (D) Virginia became a royal colony because John Smith had to leave Jamestown.

- 3 What is the MAIN idea of the section "Settlements At Great Cost"?
 - (A) Settlements like Jamestown often involved huge losses of money and human life.
 - (B) People had to pay for settlements like Jamestown by farming and finding gold.
 - (C) Many colonists died in the Jamestown settlement because there wasn't enough food.
 - (D) Colonies like Jamestown grew valuable cash crops like tobacco.

- 4 Which detail would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
 - (A) information about how a colonist took to cannibalism because of starvation
 - (B) information about how much money investors lost when the Virginia company went bankrupt
 - (C) information about how Jamestown was modeled after Spanish colonization
 - (D) information about the ship that sank while bringing additional colonists and supplies