



JAMESTOWN

at **400**

Natives and Newcomers in Early Virginia

July 24, 2007 - Jan. 14, 2008 | Library, West Hall



To mark the 400th anniversary of the establishment of the English colony at Jamestown, The Huntington is presenting companion exhibitions. The show in the MaryLou and George Boone Gallery examines European depictions of Native Americans across four centuries. This special exhibition in the West Hall explores how – against challenging odds – the English created what became their first permanent settlement in North America. The show draws on The Huntington’s unsurpassed collection of rare materials relating to early Virginia, including first editions of illustrated books that gave Europeans their most sustained information about American Indians in the 16th century. Among the illustrations on display is a hand-colored version of John Smith’s famous map of Virginia.

Above: In an early woodcut, a native man (center) is shown smoking rolled tobacco leaves. The illustration appeared in Andre Thevet’s *Les singvlaritez de la France Antarctique, avtrement nomée Amerique...* (1557). Huntington Library. Cover: Detail from an early map of Virginia, published in John Smith’s *The Generall Historie of Virginia...* (first edition, 1624). Huntington Library.

FROM ONE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE, early Jamestown, Va., was the place where John Smith met Pocahontas, the colonists discovered how to grow tobacco, and the English allowed their colonists to practice self-government. This is the Jamestown of American myth, which has been celebrated ever since.

But history, of course, is much more complicated. Jamestown, in fact, was a notorious hellhole perched on the edge of a swamp. The English colonists could establish their settlement there because the local Pasapegh Indians, who called the area Tsenacommacah, had little need for it. Not long after they arrived, many of the English became ill. They suffered from what they called “fever and ague” and the “bloody fluxe,” or typhoid fever. Often too weak to get their own food, many of the first settlers suffered from malnutrition, too.

The newcomers did not anticipate such problems. In the generation leading up to the founding of Jamestown in 1607, the English had learned

A description of the tobacco plant was published in 1596 in the *Historia medicinal...loyfull newes out of the new-found vvolde* by Nicolas Monardes. A belief in the plant’s therapeutic properties, and the demand for it in Europe, influenced its cultivation by colonists as a lucrative commodity. Huntington Library.



much about the Americas in general and Virginia — named for the “virgin” Queen Elizabeth — in particular. Some travelers had returned to Europe telling of the cannibals that could be found there, and their reports inspired artists to depict scenes that resembled human barbecues. But more often the accounts that Europeans read tended to tell a more positive story. Those who chose to take their chances on a trans-Atlantic journey thought they would find fertile soils, streams choked with vast schools of fish, forests populated by large stocks of game, and Indians eager for trade. Such accounts convinced the English that Virginia could become a colony not only for those who could afford the journey but also for perhaps thousands of young men and women who lacked regular work at home and hence posed a threat to the social order.

From the start, the English hoped to make a profit in Virginia. The Huntington’s collections include stock certificates from members of the Virginia Company, the enterprise that organized the colonization of the Chesapeake region, along with documents listing some of the hundreds of English men and women who came to the New World for that purpose. Many of these migrants at first thought they would find gold or other mineral wealth. Yet even when they learned that nothing of the kind could be found, they did not give up. Instead, they turned their attention to producing tobacco. At the time, the English shared the belief that tobacco was perhaps the most important plant that had ever been discovered. They agreed that the plant was a panacea capable of curing virtually any human illness. That idea seems foolish now since we know that tobacco causes many diseases, including cancer and emphysema. Tobacco had some opponents in the 17th century, too, including King James I of England, for whom Jamestown was named. He wrote a powerful pamphlet identifying the dangers of tobacco, which transformed it from a medicinal plant to a vice.



Matoaka als Rebecca daughter to the mighty Prince Powhatan Emperour of Ananoughomuck als virginia converted and baptized in the Christian faith, and wife to the Sworth M^r John Rolfe. Comp^o Holland excu^t

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One of the few likenesses of Pocahontas, made in England in 1616 when she was about 21, shows her in European dress. The inscription gives her formal name, Matoaka, instead of her childhood nickname, "Pocahontas." She adopted the baptismal name of Rebecca after her conversion to Christianity. Pocahontas married tobacco plantation owner John Rolfe in 1614. She died in 1617 in England, where she is buried under the name Rebecca Rolfe. Huntington Library.

Nevertheless, despite a debate about tobacco's worth, the colonists at Jamestown became convinced that farming the plant was their means to economic security. Their decision to pursue it had far-ranging consequences, especially when a boat carrying approximately 20 Africans arrived on the shores of the Chesapeake in 1619. That moment signaled the birth of slavery in English America.

The English settlers who arrived in Jamestown from 1607 to 1624, when the Virginia Company dissolved, hoped to establish positive relations with the nearby Powhatans. Many of the Indians shared this aspiration, especially Powhatan himself, the *werowance* (or head man) of a confederacy of 30 groups under his nominal control. He hoped that the English would become another subordinate group. The English wanted peace with the Indians, but on their own terms. Unfortunately, tensions

flared in the region. After Powhatan himself died in 1618, the leadership of his confederacy fell to Opechancanough. More suspicious than his predecessor, the new leader of the Powhatans eventually led a raid on the English settlements on March 22, 1622, killing 347 of the newcomers (about one-third of the total). The colonists soon launched a devastating series of reprisals, which stretched from 1622 to 1644. By the time the conflict came to an end, hundreds of Powhatans had died.

Of course, a more benign image of Jamestown dominates American myth. Popular tales of the romance between Smith and Pocahontas reappear frequently in American literature, and her later marriage to the Englishman John Rolfe seems a monument to the possibility of coexistence. Pocahontas became a celebrity when she went to live with Rolfe in London. Her tragic death from

an unknown illness came shortly after she became known to the English as Rebecca and posed for one of the most famous surviving images from the 17th century.

The other part of the myth focuses on the birth of self-government in America. It is true that the English did allow the colonists to govern themselves with a locally elected assembly, which came into existence in 1619 — the same year those first Africans arrived in Virginia. American colonists in Virginia and the other 12 mainland colonies each celebrated the fact that they were self-governing. Of course, eventually the British did not appreciate some of the proclamations emanating from colonial legislatures, and the resistance movement that began in the 1760s and culminated in the Declaration of Independence signaled the limits of self-rule within an empire. But that is a separate story.

The exhibition concludes with documents from the period after the dissolution of the Virginia Company in 1624. Among these later materials are very rare and delicate 19th- and 20th-century com-

memorations of early Jamestown, including an 1857 celebratory poem, an invitation issued by President Theodore Roosevelt to the other nations of the world to join the celebration in 1907, and a mid-20th-century imaginative rendering of Captain John Smith shaking hands with a modern businessman.

Jamestown has been part of American lore for centuries. The books, letters, maps, and pictures in this show reveal what it was really like when the English established what became their first permanent colony in the Western Hemisphere.

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Guest curator

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A stock certificate, or "bill of adventure," issued to the Earl of Huntingdon in 1610 for £40. Investors were entitled to a share of the profits obtained during the voyages to Virginia, whether in "Golde, silver, and other mettals or treasure, Pearles, Precious stones, or any...commodities, or profits whatsoever." Huntington Library.



