

Captain John Smith, The Generall Historie (1624)

The Virginia Company, after receiving its charter from King James I in 1606, moved quickly to plant a colony within the territory granted to it. Within a year approximately 100 men—called adventurers—encompassing artisans, soldiers, gentlemen, and a few farmers, sailed across the Atlantic Ocean and in May 1607 established a plantation—a term that meant settlement to them—and fort on a river off the Chesapeake Bay. They named both the river and their small settlement after their monarch.

The adventurers had hoped to find readily exploitable natural resources and natives to serve as laborers, but such expectations did not, literally, bear fruit. As they struggled with the reality of the land and its indigenous people, the colonists discovered just how ill-prepared they actually were. Captain John Smith, who was admitted to the governing council in June 1607 and then elected its president in the fall of 1608, strove to correct the settlers' deficiencies, subordinate the natives, and make the colony a profitable operation. His actions ensured the survival of the colony, but his authoritarian leadership alienated many of its people. Due to his enemies' efforts, company reorganization, and a wound he suffered when some gunpowder exploded, Smith quit the colony in the fall of 1609.

From John Lankford, ed., *Captain John Smith's America: Selections from His Writings* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), pp. 81-83. [Editorial insertions appear in square brackets— Ed.]

[In the fall of 1608 Captain Christopher Newport took some of the men on an expedition up and down the peninsula to find mineral resources and to open trade relations with native inhabitants.]

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Trade they would not, and find their corn we could not; for they had hid[den] it in the woods: and being thus deluded, we arrived at Jamestown, half sick, all complaining, and tired with toil, famine, and discontent, to have only but discovered our gilded hopes, and such fruitless certainties, as Captain Smith foretold us. . . .

No sooner were we landed, but the President dispersed so many as were able, some for glass, others for tar, pitch, and soap ashes, leaving them with the fort to the Council's oversight.

But 30 of us he conducted down the river some 5 miles from Jamestown, to learn to make clapboard, cut down trees, and [to make] lye in [the] woods. Amongst the rest he had chosen Gabriel Beadle, and John Russell, the only two gallants of this last supply, and both proper gentlemen. Strange were these pleasures to their conditions; yet lodging, eating, and drinking, working or playing, they but doing as the President did himself. All these things were carried so pleasantly as within a week they became masters: making it their delight to hear the trees thunder as they fell; but the axes so oft blistered their tender fingers, that many times every third blow had a loud oath to drown the echo; for remedy of which sin, the President devised how to have every man's oaths numbered, and at night for every oath to have a can of water poured down his sleeve, with which every offender was so washed (himself and all) that a man should scarce hear an oath in a week. . . .

By this, let no man think that the President and these gentlemen spent their times as common wood hammers [cutters] at felling of trees, or such other like labors; or that they were pressed to it as hirelings, or common slaves; for what they did, after they were but once a little inured, it seemed and some conceited it, only as a pleasure and recreation: yet 30 or 40 of such voluntary gentlemen would do more in a day than 100 of the rest that must be pressed to it by compulsion; but twenty good workmen had been better than them all.

Master Scrivener, Captain Waldo, and Captain Winne at the fort, every one in like manner carefully regarded their charge. The President returning from amongst the woods, seeing the time consumed and no provision gotten, (and the ship lay idle at a great charge and did nothing) presently embarked himself in the discovery barge, giving order to the Council to send Lieutenant Percy after him with the next barge that arrived at the fort; two barges he had himself and 18 men, but arriving at Chickahominy, that dogged nation was too well acquainted with our wants, refusing to trade, with as much scorn and insolency as they could express. The President

perceiving it was Powhatan's policy to starve us, told them he came not so much for their corn, as to revenge his imprisonment [December 1607], and the death of his men murdered by them; and so landing his men and ready to charge them, they immediately fled: and presently after sent their ambassadors with corn, fish, fowl, and what they had to make their peace; (their corn being that year but bad) they complained extremely of their own wants, yet fraughted our boats with a hundred bushels of corn, and in like manner Lieutenant Percy's that not long after arrived, and having done the best they could to content us, we parted good friends, and returned to Jamestown.

Though this much contented the company (that feared nothing more than starving), yet some so envied his good success, that they rather desired to hazard a starving, than his pains should prove so much more effectual than theirs. Some projects there were invented by Newport and Ratcliffe [the former president], not only to have deposed him, but to have kept him out of the fort . . . but their horns were so much too short to effect it, as they themselves more narrowly escaped a greater mischief.

All this time our old tavern made as much of all them that had either money or ware as could be desired: by this time they were become so perfect on all sides (I mean the soldiers, sailors, and savages) as there was ten times more care to maintain their damnable and private trade, than to provide for the colony things that were necessary. Neither was it a small policy in Newport and the mariners to report in England we had such plenty, and bring us so many men without victuals, when they had so many private factors [business agents] in the fort, that within six or seven weeks, of two or three hundred axes, chisels, hoes, and pick-axes, scarce [ly] twenty could be found: and for pike-heads, shot, powder, or anything they could steal from their fellows, [which] was vendible; they knew as well (and as secretly) how to convey them to trade with the savages for furs, baskets, mussa-neeks, young beasts, or such like commodities, as exchange them with the sailors for butter, cheese, beef, pork, aqua vitae, beer, biscuit, oatmeal, and oil: and then feign all was sent them from their friends. And though Virginia afforded no furs for the store, yet one master in one voyage hath got so many by this indirect means, as he confessed to have sold in England for £30.

Those are the saint-seeming worthies of Virginia (that have notwithstanding all this, meat, drink, and wages); but now they begin to grow weary, their trade being both perceived and prevented.

None hath been in Virginia, that hath observed anything, [who] knows not this to be true: and yet the loss, the scorn, the misery, and shame, was the poor officers', gentlemen's, and careless governors', who were all thus bought and sold; the adventurers cozened, and the action overthrown by their false excuses, informations, and directions. By this let all men judge, how this business could prosper, being thus abused by such pilfering occasions. And had not Captain Newport cried *peccavi* [admitted his mistake], the President would have discharged the ship, and caused him to have stayed one year in Virginia, to learn to speak of his own experience.

Master Scrivener was sent with the barges and pinnace to *Werowocomoco*, where he found the savages more ready to fight than trade: but his vigilancy was such as prevented their projects, and by the means of Namontack, [he] got three or four hogsheads of corn; and as much *puccon*, which is a red root, which then was esteemed an excellent dye.

Captain Newport being dispatched [December 1608], with the trials [samples] of pitch, tar, glass, frankincense, soap ashes; with that clapboard and wainscot that could be provided met with Master Scrivener at Point Comfort, and so returned [to] England. We remaining were about two hundred.

Review Questions

1. How did each group, native and newcomer, act toward the other? What impact did that have on the colonists' settlement?
2. What kind of work did Smith have the men do? Were they productive?
3. What undermined Smith's efforts to secure and stabilize the colony?