

The English Colonial Experiment: Virginia and Massachusetts

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial traces the history of colonization in Virginia and New England and the separate cultures that developed.

Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Introduction

In 1600, the English had not established a permanent settlement in the Americas. Only a few years earlier, England had failed to establish a successful colony at Roanoke. Nevertheless, Thomas Hariot and other promoters continued to advertise the potential benefits of colonizing North America. In addition, English merchants and members of the royal family sought to compete with the French, Dutch, and Spanish empires.

Over the next century, however, England would outpace its European rivals in North America. It established nearly a dozen colonies and sent swarms of immigrants to populate the land. England experienced a dramatic rise in population during the 16th century, and colonies in North America appeared to be a welcoming place for those who faced overcrowding and grinding poverty at home. Following the founding of the first permanent English settlement in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, thousands of English immigrants arrived in the Chesapeake Bay region to work in the tobacco fields. Meanwhile, another stream of migrants composed of pious Puritan families sought to live as they believed scripture demanded and established colonies further north: Plymouth, Massachusetts Bay, Connecticut, and Rhode Island colonies in New England.

2. The Virginia Company, Jamestown, and Tobacco

Despite the failure of Roanoke, English promoters of colonization continued to push the commercial advantages of colonization. They also promoted a religious argument, namely the need to establish permanent, Protestant colonies in North America to combat the spread of Catholicism in the continent at the hands of the Spanish and the French.

Both arguments struck a chord with key individuals in England. By the early 1600s, wealthy English merchants

and the landed elite began to pool their resources to form **joint-stock companies**. In this novel business arrangement, which was in many ways the precursor to the modern corporation, investors provided the capital for and assumed the risk of a venture in order to reap significant returns.



TERM TO KNOW

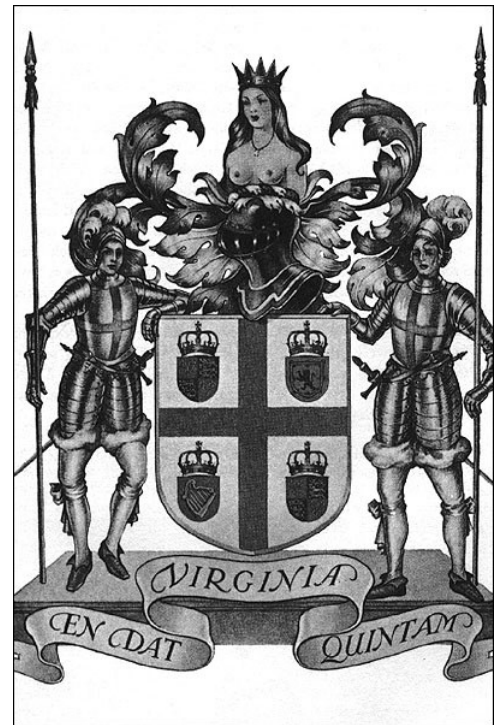
Joint-Stock Companies

A business arrangement where investors provided the capital for and assumed the risk of a venture in order to reap significant returns.

The companies gained the approval of the English crown to establish colonies in North America, and their investors dreamed of reaping great profits from the money they put into overseas colonization.

The first permanent English settlement in North America was established by a joint-stock company, the Virginia Company. Named for Elizabeth, the “virgin queen,” the company gained royal approval to establish a colony on the east coast of North America, and in 1606, it sent 144 men and boys to the New World. In early 1607, this group sailed up the Chesapeake Bay. Finding a river they called the James in honor of their new king, James I, they established a ramshackle settlement and named it Jamestown.

Many of Jamestown’s settlers were desperate men. Although most came from elite families, they were younger sons who would not inherit their father’s estates in England. Thus, these settlers hoped to find instant wealth in Virginia, but because they still considered themselves gentlemen, they did not actually expect to have to perform work to achieve that goal. Also, many colonists did not possess important practical or survival skills. The majority of the first colonists in Jamestown were gentlemen and artisans rather than farmers or carpenters. They were not ideal colonists and, as **John Smith** later remarked, most were men who “would rather starve than work.”



The Virginia Company Coat of Arms



PEOPLE TO KNOW

John Smith

Jamestown colonist who served as president of the colony in its early years and whose leadership is credited with the colony’s survival.

Starve they did. Out of the 144 men and boys who started the Jamestown colony in 1607, only 38 survived the first winter. Such a dramatic decline in the colonial population was a product of a number of factors. For one thing, Jamestown was located on a poor site along the James River with no arable farmland nearby and limited access to clean water. Secondly, shortly after their arrival, the Jamestown colonists became engaged in intermittent conflict with nearby Native Americans led by Chief Powhatan. By 1622, this conflict broke into all-out warfare and nearly destroyed Jamestown.

The settlers’ inability and, in some cases, unwillingness to grow their own food compounded Jamestown’s unstable situation. Jamestown colonists were essentially employees of the Virginia Company. Investors in England had provided the capital and assumed the risk in order to reap any potential profits discovered in Virginia. As a result, colonists in Jamestown were compelled to find a profit for their shareholders in England

as well as for themselves. Most responded to this predicament by devoting themselves to finding gold and silver instead of finding ways to grow their own food.

Because of environmental factors, conflict with nearby Native Americans, and colonists' unwillingness to grow food to meet their shareholders' demands, Jamestown was on the brink of collapse by the mid-1620s. For instance, only 1,200 of the 7,500 settlers who came to Virginia between 1607 and 1624 survived.



DID YOU KNOW

In 1609, a ship bound for Jamestown foundered in a storm and landed on Bermuda. The admiral of the ship, George Somers, claimed the island for the English Crown. Some believe that this ship's fate helped inspire Shakespeare's 1611 play, *The Tempest*.

Political stability in Jamestown came slowly. By 1619, the fledgling colony was operating under the leadership of a governor, a council, and a House of Burgesses. More stability came in 1624, when the English Crown revoked the Virginia Company's charter, and assumed direct oversight of the colony.

Improved economic prospects, namely the production of tobacco, also helped Jamestown. Tobacco was another important product of the Columbian Exchange. The plant was originally domesticated in the New World, and Europeans were not familiar with it. For example, when Columbus first landed on the island of Hispaniola, he encountered inhabitants who were inhaling tobacco, and they offered Columbus and his men dried tobacco leaves as a gift. After all, for the local inhabitants, tobacco was a sacred plant. It was used for smoking, but the native people also associated it with healing and medicinal qualities. However, by the 1600s, an increasing number of Europeans (as well as European colonists) had come to enjoy smoking tobacco and saw the plant as a valuable commodity.

John Rolfe—the Jamestown colonist who ultimately married Pocahontas—showed that tobacco cultivation could be profitable in Virginia. In 1614, Rolfe exported the first profitable shipments of tobacco to England, and the profits saved the colony from ruin. Tobacco became as good as gold to Virginia, and it enriched an emerging class of tobacco planters in the region. By 1624, the year the English Crown assumed direct oversight of the colony, planters produced more than 200,000 pounds of tobacco. Ten years later, in 1634, a second tobacco colony, Maryland, was formed when King Charles I granted its charter to the Calvert family for their loyal service to the Crown.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

John Rolfe

Jamestown colonist who introduced the cultivation of tobacco to Virginia.

With the success of tobacco, English settlement in the Chesapeake region was assured. Much like elsewhere in the Americas, such success centered upon the production of a cash crop—in this case, tobacco.

3. Plymouth Colony, Massachusetts Bay, and New England

The second major area to be colonized by the English in the first half of the 17th century, New England, differed markedly in its founding principles from the commercially oriented Chesapeake tobacco colonies. Settled largely by waves of Puritan families in the 1630s, New England had a religious orientation from the start.

In England, reform-minded men and women had been calling for greater changes to the Church of England

since the 1580s. These reformers, who followed the teachings of John Calvin and other Protestant reformers, were called **Puritans** because of their insistence on “purifying” the Church of England of what they believed to be unscriptural, especially Catholic elements that lingered in its institutions and practices.



TERM TO KNOW

Puritans

English Protestants who were dissatisfied with the Church of England and insisted on “purifying” the church from any Catholic elements that lingered in its institutions and practices.

Many Puritans who provided leadership in early New England—many of whom were members of another joint-stock company known as the Massachusetts Bay Company—were learned ministers who had studied at Cambridge or Oxford. However, because they questioned the practices of the Church of England, the king and his officials deprived them of any career in the church. Meanwhile, other Puritan leaders, such as the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, **John Winthrop**, came from the privileged class of the English gentry. These well-to-do Puritans and many thousands more left their English homes not to establish a land of religious freedom but to practice their own form of Protestantism without persecution and, if possible, reform the Church of England from afar.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

John Winthrop

Puritan religious leader who served as the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in New England.

The first group of Puritans to make their way across the Atlantic was a small contingent known as the Pilgrims. Unlike other Puritans, they insisted on a complete separation from the Church of England and had first migrated to the Dutch Republic seeking religious freedom. Although they found they could worship without hindrance there, they grew concerned that they were losing their Englishness as they saw their children begin to learn the Dutch language and adopt Dutch ways. In addition, the English Pilgrims (and others in Europe) feared another attack on the Dutch Republic by Catholic Spain.

Therefore, in 1620, English Pilgrims moved on to found the Plymouth Colony in present-day Massachusetts. The governor of Plymouth, **William Bradford**, was a Separatist who advocated for the colony’s complete separation from the Church of England. On board their ship, known as the *Mayflower*, Bradford and forty other adult men signed the **Mayflower Compact**, which presented their rationale for colonization.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

William Bradford

Puritan religious leader who led a group of English Pilgrims from the Netherlands to New England and established the Plymouth Colony in 1620.



TERM TO KNOW

Mayflower Compact

An agreement signed by the male passengers of the *Mayflower* that presented the Pilgrims’ rationale for establishing Plymouth colony.

A selection from the Mayflower Compact is provided below:

The Mayflower Compact

“...Having undertaken, for the Glory of God, and advancements of the Christian faith and honor of our King and Country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the Northern parts of Virginia, do by these presents, solemnly and mutually, in the presence of God, and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic; for our better ordering, and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions, and offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the colony; unto which we promise all due submission and obedience....”



BRAINSTORM

The Mayflower Compact has been called the first American governing document, as it predated the US Constitution by more than 150 years. But, based on the selection above, was the Mayflower Compact a constitution? How much authority did it convey, and to whom?

A much larger group of English Puritans left England in the 1630s to establish the Massachusetts Bay Colony and, later on, the New Haven colony, the Connecticut colony, and Rhode Island. Unlike the exodus of young males to the Chesapeake colonies, these migrants were families with young children and their university-trained ministers. Their aim, according to John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts Bay, was to create a model of reformed Protestantism—a “city upon a hill.”

Winthrop’s idea of a “city upon a hill” made clear the religious orientation of Massachusetts Bay. Puritans in the colony looked to New England’s environment as a place that could provide the foundation for a new moral society that the rest of the world would want to emulate, including nearby Native Americans. Indeed, part of the charter for the colony stated as a goal that the colony should “wynn and incite the Natives of [this] Country [New England], to the Knowledg and Obedience of the onlie true God and [Savior] of Mankinde, and the Christian Fayth.”



(a)



(b)

(a) In the 1629 seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, a Native American is shown asking colonists to “Come over and help us.” This seal indicates the religious ambitions of John Winthrop. (b) The colony’s first governor for his “city upon a hill”

The majority of individuals who migrated to Massachusetts Bay arrived in family units, which helped facilitate the rapid creation of a society that mirrored England. Most individuals in the colony were part of a family household. The sex ratio in Massachusetts Bay was relatively balanced, in stark contrast to the Chesapeake colony, which was predominantly male. The most important difference was perhaps the fact that the New England colonists possessed a variety of skills and were from all ranks of English society, unlike the gentlemen who first tried to make a living in Virginia.

Immigrants to New England hoped to improve their earthly condition as well as their spiritual condition. However, unlike the first colonists in Virginia who sought to get rich, most New England colonists sought a comfortable independence, or a means to sustain one’s family. These colonists quickly realized that they could achieve such independence by utilizing the natural resources that New England provided.

Thus, the creation of Massachusetts Bay was motivated by religious faith, and reinforced by family units that took advantage of plentiful natural resources to promote a comfortable independence. All of these factors contributed to a colony very different from Virginia and Maryland in the Chesapeake region.



DID YOU KNOW

Many historians believe the fault lines separating what later became the North and South in the United States originated in the profound differences between the Chesapeake and the New England colonies.



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, we examined the history and motivations of colonization in Virginia and New England. The English who migrated across the Atlantic Ocean to North America had different motivations and goals, which were reflected in the subsequent creation of colonies in the Chesapeake Bay and New England. In the Chesapeake Bay, English immigrants established Virginia and Maryland with a decidedly commercial orientation. Though the early Virginians at Jamestown hoped to find gold, they and the settlers in Maryland discovered (after much conflict, death, and hardship) that growing tobacco was the only sure means of making money. Meanwhile, a very different group of English men and women flocked to the cold climate and rocky soil of New England. Puritan immigrants were spurred by religious motives and desires for a comfortable independence. They often followed their ministers and key leaders, such as John Winthrop, who envisioned a “city upon a hill” where Puritanism thrived and served as a model for the rest of the Christian world. The establishment of these settlements marked the growing role of England in North America.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Joint-Stock Companies

A business arrangement where investors provided the capital for and assumed the risk of a venture in order to reap significant returns.

Mayflower Compact

An agreement signed by the male passengers of the Mayflower, creating a temporary government for the Plymouth colony.

Puritans

English Protestants who were dissatisfied with the Church of England and sought simpler forms of worship.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

John Rolfe

Jamestown colonist who introduced the cultivation of tobacco to Virginia.

John Smith

Jamestown colonist who served as president of the colony in its early years and whose leadership is

credited with the colony's survival.

John Winthrop

Puritan religious leader who served as the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in New England.

William Bradford

Puritan religious leader who led a group of English Pilgrims from the Netherlands to New England and established the Plymouth Colony in 1620.

**DATES TO KNOW****1550–1600**

Puritanism emerges as a Protestant religious reform movement.

1584

Sir Walter Raleigh establishes a short-lived English colony at Roanoke in present-day North Carolina.

1606

The Virginia Company of London is founded.

1607

The Virginia Company establishes England's first permanent settlement in North America at Jamestown.

1609–1610

Jamestown settlers experience the "Starving Time."

1612

John Rolfe introduces tobacco production to Jamestown.

1619

Virginia's House of Burgesses convenes for the first time.

1620

Pilgrims found Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts and sign the Mayflower Compact.

1622

The Second Anglo-Powhatan War breaks out between Chief Powhatan and Jamestown settlers.

1624

The English Crown revokes the Virginia Company's charter and assumes direct oversight of the Virginia colony.

1630

Puritans found Massachusetts Bay Colony.

1634

A second English tobacco colony, Maryland, is formed by King Charles I.