

Think About It: How Did the Experience of the English Settlers Differ?

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial, we take a closer look at the experiences of the first English settlers who arrived in the Jamestown and Massachusetts colonies. As we have learned, the English colonists in these regions had different backgrounds and different motivations for sailing across the Atlantic. The regions they settled in also had very different climates, geographical features, and natural resources. As a result, their experiences in the early years differed in important ways. We will also continue to practice reading and analyzing primary sources as a historian would, keeping in mind the 5 Ws and 5 Cs, with a keen eye toward bias.

Our discussion will break down like this:

1. Selling Jamestown

Recall that the Jamestown Colony was primarily a private enterprise sponsored by the Virginia Company of London (a joint-stock company) for economic gain. Investors in the Virginia Company hoped to find valuable natural resources, such as gold or silver, to trade with the local native populations and to exploit the region for other potentially valuable natural resources or agriculture. The first three ships that brought English settlers to what would become the Jamestown colony carried approximately 144 men of varying ages. Some listed their occupation simply as “gentleman.” Others who listed their occupations as masons, bricklayers, and carpenters, for example, were more accustomed to hard physical labor. The ships carried no women, although a small trickle of women and children would arrive in the next few years.

The location for the settlement selected by the colonists was not ideal. On a peninsula feeding into the Chesapeake Bay, Jamestown was swampy and lacked clean drinking water. In the summer, the climate was hot, and the settlement was a haven for disease. And despite Virginia’s more southerly latitude compared to England, the winters were colder and snowier. After the first winter in Jamestown, only 38 of the original settlers remained alive. The Virginia Company knew it needed to attract more support in the form of financial investors and adventurers willing to make the journey across the Atlantic to save its failing venture. In 1609, Robert Johnson, the son-in-law of the Virginia Company’s treasurer, published *Nova Britannia* to do just that. In it, he wrote:

Nova Britannia

The country it selfe is large and great assuredly, though as yet, no exact discovery can bee made of all. It is also commendable and hopefull every way, the ayre and clymate most sweete and wholesome, much warmer then England, and very agreeable to our Natures: It is inhabited with wild and savage people, that live and lie up and downe in troupes like heards of Deare in a Forrest: they have no law but nature, their apparell skinnes of beasts, but most goe naked: the better sort have houses, but poore ones, they have no Arts nor Science, yet they live under superior command such as it is, they are generally very loving and gentle, and doe entertaine and relieve our people with great kindnesse . . .

. . . the land yeeldeth naturallie for the sustentation of man, abundance of fish, both scale and shell: of land and water fowles, infinite store: of Deere, Kaine and Fallow, Stages, Coneys, and Hares, with many fruits and rootes good for meate. There are valleyes and plaines streaming with sweete Springs, like veynes in a naturall bodie: there are hills and mountaines making a sensible proffer of hidden treasure, never yet searched: the land is full of mineralles, plentie of woods. . . But of this that I have said, if bare nature be so amiable in its naked kind, what may we hope, when Arte and Nature both shall joyne, and strive together, to give best content to man and beast?

As you have learned, historians take great care when reading primary sources and always think about the context of the source to account for possible bias. This is one of the 5 Cs and a key part of critical thinking. Imagine reading this source without considering the greater context of the Virginia Company's mission in the New World, simply taking the source at face value. Johnson glowingly describes an abundance of natural resources in Virginia and limitless economic potential. He describes the native population in simplistic, romantic terms, as "gentle and loving" and eager to embrace the culture and religion of the English. But are these descriptions accurate? Do they tell the whole story?



THINK ABOUT IT

Remember your 5 Ws. Who is Johnson? When and what is he writing? And why? Might Johnson's descriptions be influenced by his purpose—in other words, is there a bias present?

2. Jamestown in the Eyes of the Settlers

Owing to poor environmental conditions in Jamestown in the early years, as well as attacks from local Native Americans, the death rate in the colony remained high. Though ships carrying hundreds of new arrivals landed at Jamestown each year after 1607, by 1611 the population still hovered at slightly over 100. The winter of 1609–1610 was particularly bad. Known as the "Starving Time," the colony lost approximately 75% of its residents. The following two accounts describe the experiences of the Jamestown settlers in their own words.

George Percy, governor of the Virginia colony from 1609–1610, wrote a first-hand account of this terrible winter in "A Trewe Relacyon" ("A True Relation"). In it, he detailed the dire situation faced by the colonists and the desperate measures (including cannibalism) they took to survive the winter.

Governor George Percy: "A Trewe Relacyon"

Then haveinge fedd uponn horses and other beastes as long as they Lasted we weare gladd to

make shifte with vermine as doggs Catts Ratts and myce All was fishe thatt came to Nett to satisfye Crewell hunger as to eate Bootes shoes or any other leather some colde Come by And those being Spente and devoured some weare inforced to searche the woodes and to feede upon Serpents and snakes and to digge the earthe for wylde and unknowne Rootes where many of our men weare Cutt off of and slayne by the Salvages. And now famin begineinge to Looke gastely and pale in every face thatt notheinge was spared to mainteyne Lyfe and to doe those things wch seame incredible As to digge up dead corpses outt of graves and to eate them and some have Licked upp the Bloode wch hathe fallen from their weake fellowes And amongste the reste this was moste Lamentable Thatt one of our Colline murdered his wyfe Ripped the childe outt of her woambe and threw itt into the River and after chopped the Mother in pieces and salted her for his foode.

In 1623, Richard Frethorne, an indentured servant in Martin's Hundred, near Jamestown, wrote a letter to his parents in England several months after he arrived in the New World. Frethorne's letter suggests that conditions in Virginia had only marginally improved in the intervening years.

Richard Frethorne: Letter to His Parents

This is to let you understand that I your child am in a most heavy case by reason of the country, [which] is such that it causeth much sickness, [such] as the scurvy and the bloody flux and diverse other diseases, which maketh the body very poor and weak. And when we are sick there is nothing to comfort us; for since I came out of the ship I never ate anything but peas, and loblollie (that is, water gruel). As for deer or venison I never saw any since I came into this land. . . [You would be grieved] if you did know as much as I [do], when people cry out day and night – Oh! That they were in England without their limbs – and would not care to lose any limb to be in England again, yea, though they beg from door to door. For we live in fear of the enemy every hour . . . for we are in great danger; for our plantation is very weak by reason of the death and sickness of our company. For we came but twenty for the merchants, and they are half dead just; and we look every hour when two more should go.

. . . Wherefore, for God's sake, pity me. I pray you to remember my love to all my friends and kindred. I hope all my brothers and sisters are in good health, and as for my part I have set down my resolution that certainly will be; that is, that the answer of this letter will be life or death to me [earlier in the letter Frethorne asks his father to "redeem" him; that is, send him money to pay off his indentured servitude].

Frethorne appears on a list of the dead in Martin's Hundred in 1624.

Both these accounts document suffering, disease, death, and, in the case of Frethorne, threats from local Native Americans (whom he calls the "enemy") during the Second Anglo-Powhatan War. There is no doubt among historians that life in early Virginia was very hard and often deadly. But how should we read Percy's and Frethorne's descriptions of life in the early Virginia colony alongside *Nova Britannia*? As an appeal to parents for aid and an account of Percy's leadership meant for public consumption, can these sources be taken at face value? Or do they also need to be read with a critical eye and consideration for *why* they were written?



THINK ABOUT IT

Of the three sources above, which one or ones do you think are more reliable descriptions of the Virginia Colony?

3. Settlers in Massachusetts

In contrast to Jamestown, the early Massachusetts colonies (Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay) were not settled primarily for economic gain. As we have learned, Puritans migrated to America to establish themselves in a new land where they could practice their religion without interference. The *Mayflower* was the first ship of religious separatists, with 102 settlers led by William Bradford, and it arrived in 1620. They quickly established a colony in Plymouth, on the eastern shore of Massachusetts. Delayed in their ocean voyage, the ship arrived in November, and its occupants were unprepared for the onset of winter. As a result, many died by spring. In 1630, a much larger contingent of Puritans (approximately 900 people) led by John Winthrop set sail for Massachusetts. Once again, however, these settlers were not driven by dreams of money and glory but of religious freedom. Unlike the ships arriving in Jamestown in its early years, the Puritan migration was one of families, including men, women, and children, many of whom had no intention of ever returning to England.

Unlike the settlement in the unhealthy environment of the Chesapeake Bay, the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies benefited from several advantages. Although the winters were cold, the more northerly climate kept diseases at bay. For several reasons, Native Americans in Massachusetts posed less of a threat to the English settlers than did their counterparts in Virginia. Moreover, fresh water and sources of food in the north were abundant. Finally, the Puritans carried with them a religiously inspired work ethic and sense of shared purpose that translated into cohesive communities and, ultimately, a thriving population.

In 1621, William Hilton, who arrived at the Plymouth Colony that year aboard the ship *Fortune*, wrote a letter to his cousin in England asking that his wife and children join him (they did so in 1623). In it, he paints a promising picture of life in “New England,” as it came to be called.

William Hilton: Letter to His Cousin

At our arrival at New Plymouth, in New England, we found all our friends and planters in good health, though they were left sick and weak, with very small means; the Indians round about us peaceable and friendly; the country very pleasant and temperate, yielding naturally, of itself, great store of fruits, as vines of divers sorts, in great abundance. . . . Timber of all sorts you have in England doth cover the land, that affords beasts of divers sorts, and great flocks of turkeys, quails, pigeons and partridges; many great lakes abounding with fish, fowl, beavers, and otters. The sea affords us great plenty of all excellent sorts of sea-fish, as the rivers and isles doth variety of wild fowl of most useful sorts. Mines we find, to our thinking; but neither the goodness nor quality we know. Better grain cannot be than the Indian corn, if we will plant it upon as good ground as a man need desire . . . Our company are, for the most part, very religious, honest people; the word of God sincerely taught us ever Sabbath; so that I know not any thing a contented mind can here want. I desire your friendly care to send my wife and children to me, where I wish all the friends I have in England. . .



THINK ABOUT IT

In his letter, note the faith that Hilton has in the prospects of the colony. Think about when Hilton wrote his letter. What does it tell us about the Plymouth Colony that Hilton immediately sent for his wife and

children? Can we take Hilton's letter as evidence that the Puritans faced no real hardships in New England, or does he have reason to overstate the ease of life in the region? Historians understand that history is complex. Could reality be more complicated?



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, we read several primary source documents for what they can tell us about the experiences of English settlers in the early Virginia and Massachusetts colonies. As a result of their purpose, demographics, geography, and relations with local Native American peoples (among other reasons), the experience of early English settlers differed by region. We also practiced reading and analyzing primary documents as a historian would, using the 5 Ws and the 5 Cs to understand more fully what these documents can tell us about the past and what their limitations are.

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