

CHAPTER 2

The Planting of English America, 1500–1733

FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. What international events and domestic changes prompted England to begin colonization?
2. What was it like for the early settlers of Jamestown?
3. Why were Native Americans unable to repel the English colonization of North America?
4. What crops were important to the English colonies in the south of North America? How did the cultivation of those crops shape those colonies?
5. How did the English sugar plantations of the Caribbean differ from the English colonies in the south of North America?
6. How did slavery develop in North America during colonization?
7. What features were shared by Virginia, Maryland, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia? What distinguished them from one another?

CHAPTER THEMES

Theme: The English hoped to follow Spain's example of finding great wealth in the New World, and that influenced the financing and founding of the early southern colonies. The focus on making the southern colonies profitable shaped colonial decisions, including choice of crops and the use of indentured and slave labor. This same focus also helped create economic and cultural ties between the early southern colonies and English settlements in the West Indies.

Theme: The early southern colonies' encounters with Indians and African slaves established the patterns of race relations that would shape the North American experience—in particular, warfare and reservations for the Indians and lifelong slave codes for African Americans.

Theme: After a late start, a proud, nationalistic England joined the colonial race and successfully established five colonies along the southeastern seacoast of North America. Although varying somewhat in origins and character, all these colonies exhibited plantation agriculture, indentured and slave labor, a tendency toward strong economic and social hierarchies, and a pattern of widely scattered, institutionally weak settlements.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The defeat of the Spanish Armada and the exuberant spirit of Elizabethan nationalism finally drew England into the colonial race. After some early failures, the first permanent English colony was established at Jamestown, Virginia. Initially it faced harsh conditions and Indian hostility, but tobacco cultivation finally brought prosperity and population growth. Its charter also guaranteed colonists the same rights as Englishmen and developed an early form of representative self-government.

The early encounters of English settlers with the Powhatans in Virginia established many of the patterns that characterized later Indian-white relations in North America. Indian societies underwent their own

substantial changes as a result of warfare, disease, trade, and the mingling and migration of Indians from the Atlantic coast to inland areas.

Other colonies were established in Maryland and the Carolinas. South Carolina flourished by establishing close ties with the British sugar colonies in the West Indies. It also borrowed the West Indian pattern of harsh slave codes and large plantation agriculture. North Carolina developed somewhat differently, with fewer slaves and more white colonists who owned small farms. Latecomer Georgia served initially as a buffer against the Spanish and a haven for debtors.

Despite some differences, all the southern colonies depended on staple plantation agriculture for their survival and on the institutions of indentured servitude and enslaved Africans for their labor. With widely scattered rural settlements, they had relatively weak religious and social institutions and tended to develop hierarchical economic and social orders.

DEVELOPING THE CHAPTER: SUGGESTED LECTURE OR DISCUSSION TOPICS

- Examine the condition of England at the time of the nation's early colonization efforts. Focus especially on the rise of the Elizabethan monarchy and the spirit of the English renaissance (for example, Shakespeare or Sir Walter Raleigh) in London and other commercial centers, as well as the social upheaval in the countryside (enclosure). Show how these factors—as well as religious rivalry with Spain—lay behind the colonization effort.

REFERENCE: Carl Bridenbaugh, *Vexed and Troubled Englishmen, 1590–1642* (1968).

- Consider the traditional Indian cultures of the south Atlantic coastal regions, and examine the transformations they underwent in response to English colonization. Explain the particular changes that affected the Powhatans of Virginia in relation to the larger patterns of English-Indian encounters that shaped subsequent American history.

REFERENCE: Helen Rountree, *The Powhatans of Virginia: Their Traditional Culture* (1989).

- Examine the issue of race relations in the early southern colonies, showing how the early patterns established there set a course for subsequent American history. Focus particularly on the policies of driving out the Indians and of importing African slaves as a solution to the labor shortages in the New World.

REFERENCE: Timothy Silver, *A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, Colonists, and Slaves in South Atlantic Forests 1500–1800* (1990).

FOR FURTHER INTEREST: ADDITIONAL CLASS TOPICS

- Contrast the pattern of English colonization with that of Spain described in Chapter 1 (or perhaps, with that of France described in Chapter 6). Examine similarities and differences in motivation, population patterns, race relations, economic development, and the like.
- Compare the legends of early English colonization with the often harsh realities: for example, the tale of John Smith and Pocahontas with the actual patterns of relations between whites and Indians in Virginia. Consider why many early settlers tried to paint a rosier portrait of the colonies than their actual conditions warranted (to satisfy investors and lure new colonists).
- Contrast other English New World settlements, particularly in the West Indies, with those on the North American mainland. Note especially how in the West Indies, many white plantation owners became absentees who spent much of their time in England, whereas the North American colonies

developed as more complete, autonomous societies. (South Carolina can be used as an example of a partially West Indian pattern in North America.)

CHARACTER SKETCHES

John Smith (1580–1631)

The adventures that are popularly identified with Captain John Smith—having his life saved by Pocahontas and Smith’s own rescue of the infant Jamestown colony from ruin—were first recorded by Smith himself. Whether these events were invention or fact, one thing is certain: Smith lived an extraordinarily dramatic life.

According to Smith’s autobiography, he left England at an early age to become a soldier of fortune. His many escapades included being enslaved, murdering his master, and being seduced by the wife of the pasha of Turkey. The trouble with these and other of Smith’s tales is that their only source is Smith himself; in fact, historians have shown that some of his stories were made up. He was, however, a talented soldier and administrator, whose efforts in organizing the Jamestown colonists and in obtaining corn from the Indians clearly helped save the colony from starvation in the winter of 1608–1609.

Smith’s writings, including *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles* (1624), are fascinating, even if they are more fiction than history. Actually, most historians today believe that the core of his narrative is true, but that Smith simply embellished and altered particular events to increase their dramatic effect.

Quote: “Pocahontas, the King’s most dear and well-beloved daughter, being but a childe of twelve or thirteen years of age, whose compassionate, pitiful heart, of my desperate estate, gave me much cause to respect her.... After some six weeks fattening amongst those savage courtiers, at the minute of my execution, she hazarded the beating out of her own brains to save mine; and not only that, but so prevailed with her father that I was safely conducted to Jamestown, where I found about eight and thirty miserable, poor and sick creatures.... Such was the weakness of this poor Commonwealth, as had the savages not fed us, we directly had starved.” (1624)

REFERENCE: Philip Barbour, *The Three Worlds of Captain John Smith* (1964).

Pocahontas (1595–1617)

Although the story of Pocahontas’s rescue of John Smith from death, at the hands of her father, the great chief Powhatan, may or may not be true (most likely not), it is certain that she played an important role in the Virginia colony’s early years as a kind of ambassador between the English and the Powhatan Indians—a role that Powhatan himself likely arranged. The children of powerful chiefs frequently played such intermediary roles in eastern Indian cultures. It is also known that she visited Jamestown often, sometimes to negotiate prisoner releases.

Her formal tribal name was Matoaka, meaning playful. (Pocahontas [“frolicsome”] was a pet name.) In 1613 she was kidnapped by Captain Samuel Argall and taken to live with a clergyman, though it may be that she collaborated in this arrangement as well. Shortly after, she was instructed in Christianity and baptized. She married John Rolfe, the promoter of tobacco, in 1614.

Rolfe took her to England in 1616, where she was badly affected by the climate and urban environment of London. She was presented to King James I at court, but as she boarded ship to return to Virginia, she became ill and died. Many later writers and poets—including Stephen Vincent Benét—have celebrated her brief but romantic life.

REFERENCE: Peter Lampe, *Pocahontas* (1995).

John Rolfe (1585–1622)

Rolfe was born in the county of Norfolk, England. Unhappy with his economic prospects, he sailed for Virginia in 1609 with his first wife but was shipwrecked in Bermuda, where his wife died. Rolfe pushed on to Virginia and arrived the following year. In 1612, he began experimenting with a sweeter variety of tobacco from the West Indies. (The native leaf smoked by the Powhatans of Virginia was too bitter for English tastes.) Despite the strong hostility to smoking felt by many English authorities, including King James I, the new tobacco caught on quickly and saved the colony's economy.

In 1614, Rolfe's status as the promoter of tobacco persuaded Pocahontas's father and Virginia governor Thomas Dale to grant Rolfe permission to marry the Indian princess. Before her death in England, Pocahontas gave birth to a son, Thomas, who was raised by an uncle in England.

Rolfe returned to Virginia, married again, and served on the colony's Council of State. He was killed by Indians in the Second Anglo-Powhatan War (1622). In 1640, his son, Thomas, returned to Virginia, where his many descendants continued to live.

Quote: “Likewise, add hereunto her great appearance of love to me, her desire to be taught and instructed in the knowledge of God, her capableness of understanding, and her aptness and willingness to receive any good impression, besides her own incitements stirring me up.” (Letter to Governor Thomas Dale, 1614, explaining reasons for wanting to marry Pocahontas)

REFERENCE: Philip Barbour, *Pocahontas and Her World* (1970).

QUESTIONS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION

1. What did England and the English settlers really want from colonization? Did they want national glory, wealth, adventure, a solution to social tensions, and/or new sources of goods and trade? Did they get what they wanted?
2. How did Spanish success in the New World influence the English colonial efforts? How did England's earlier experience in Ireland influence its colonial efforts in the New World? How did different events in England (and Europe) affect England's southern colonies in the New World?
3. Were the English colonizers crueler or more tolerant than the Spanish *conquistadores*? Why did the Spanish tend to settle and intermarry with the Indian population, whereas the English killed the Indians, drove them out, or confined them to separate territories? How did this pattern of interaction affect both white and Indian societies?
4. Was the development of enslaved Africans in the North American colonies inevitable? (Consider that it never developed in some other colonial areas, for example, Mexico and New France.) How would the North American colonies have been different without slavery? What role did the Spanish *encomienda* system and British sugar colonies play in introducing slavery to the southern colonies?
5. How did the reliance on plantation agriculture affect the southern colonies? Were their societies relatively loose because they were primarily rural or because they tended to rely on forced labor systems?

MAKERS OF AMERICA: THE IROQUOIS

Questions for Class Discussion

1. It is sometimes suggested that the Iroquois Confederacy may have provided a model for the union of states into the United States of America. What similarities and differences are there between the two confederations?
2. What role did the Iroquois play in the politics and warfare of British North America? Was the decision of most Iroquois to side with the British in the Revolutionary War the most decisive moment in their history? Why or why not?

Suggested Student Exercises

- Use a map of upstate New York to locate the traditional Iroquois lands as well as present-day areas of settlement. Examine materials on the efforts of today's Iroquois to recover lands and obtain governmental recognition in both New York state and Canada.
- Look at the conflict between Britain and the American colonies from an Iroquois perspective. Ask students to consider how subsequent history might have been different had the British defeated the Americans in the Revolution.