

VIEWPOINTS

On Life in Jamestown

CHAPTER 2

The harsh realities of life in Virginia shattered the dreams of the colonists who left England in search of a better life. No one seemed to have been prepared to survive in Jamestown, much less to prosper.

As you read the passages below, keep in mind the dreams and expectations of the first English settlers who arrived in America.

DREAMS OF RICHES

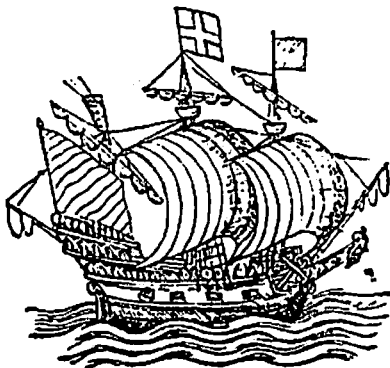
Drama, poetry, and literature in the early 1600s portrayed Virginia as a land of beauty and wealth. The following description of Virginia is from Eastward Ho!, a popular play in London.

I tell thee golde is more plentifull there than copper is with us. . . . Why man all their dripping pans and their chamber pottes are pure golde . . . and as for rubies and diamonds, they goe forth on holy dayes and gather 'hem by the seashore to hang on their children's coates and sticke in their cappes.

NOVA BRITANNIA: OFFERING MOST

Excellent fruites by Planting in
VIRGINIA.

Exciting all such as be well affected
to further the same.



LONDON
Printed for SAMUEL MACHAN, and are to be sold at
his Shop in Pauls Church-yard, at the
Signe of the Bul-head.
1609.

BOUNTIFUL LAND

In 1609, the London Company published a pamphlet promoting Virginia as a good investment and place to colonize.

There are valleys and plains streaming with sweet springs, like veins in a natural body. There are hills and mountains making a sensible proffer of hidden treasure, never yet searched. The land is full of minerals and plenty of woods, of which we have a lack in England. There are growing goodly oaks and elms, beech and birch, spruce, walnut, cedar and fir trees in great abundance. The soil is strong and lusty of its own nature. . . . It yields also resin, turpentine, pitch and tar, sassafras, mulberry trees and silk worms, many skins and rich furs, many sweet woods and dyers' woods and other costly dyes, plenty of sturgeon, timber for shipping, mast, plant and deal, soap ashes, caviar, and what else we know not yet, because our days are young. . . .

Our land [England] abounds with swarms of idle persons, which having no means of labor to relieve their misery, do likewise swarm in lewd and naughty practises, so that if we seek not some ways for their foreign employment, we must shortly provide more prisons and corrections for their bad conditions. . . .

Be they never so poor, so they be honest, and painful, the place shall make them rich: all kinds of artificers we must first employ, as carpenters, shipwrights, masons, sawyers, bricklayers, ploughmen, sowers, planters, fishermen, coopers, smiths, metalmen, tailors, turners, and such like, to make and fit all necessities for comfort and use of the colony. For such as have no trades, if they be industrious, they shall have employment enough.

(continued)

VIEWPOINTS**REALITIES OF JAMESTOWN**

An account of the harsh and desperate conditions that characterized early settlement was recorded by a survivor of the "starving time," the winter of 1609-1610 in Jamestown.

Now we all found the losse of Captaine Smith, yea his greatest maligners could now curse his losse: as for corne provision and contribution from the Salvages, we had nothing but mortall wounds, with clubs and arrowes; as for our Hogs, Hens, Goats, Sheepe, Horse, or what lived, our commanders, officers and Salvages daily consumed them, some small proportions sometimes we tasted, till all was devoured; then swords, armes, pieces, or any thing, wee traded with the Salvages, whose cruell fingers were so oft imbrowed in our blouds, that what by their crueltie, our Governours indiscretion, and the losse of our ships, of five hundred within six moneths after Captaine Smiths departure, there remained not past sixtie men, women, and children, most miserable and poore creatures; and those were preserved for the most part, by roots, herbes, acornes, walnuts, berries, now and then a little fish . . . yea even the very skinnies of our horses. . . .

This was that time, which still to this day we called the starving time; it were too vile to say, and scarce to be beleaved, what we endured: but the occasion was our owne, for want of

providence industrie and government, and not the barrennesse and defect of the Countrie, as is generally supposed; for till then in three yeeres, . . . we endured all that is said, and chiefly lived on what this good Countrie naturally afforded. Yet had wee beene even in Paradice it selfe with these Governours, it would not have beene much better withe us. . . .

DISEASE AND HUNGER

George Percy, a leader in Jamestown, vividly described conditions the first year.

Our men were destroyed with cruel diseases as swellings, fluxes, burning fevers, and by warres, and some departed suddenly, but for the most part they died of meere famine. There were never Englishmen left in a foreign country in such miserie. . . . We watched every three nights, lying on the bare cold ground . . . and warded all the next day, which brought our men to be most feeble wretches. Our food was but a small can of barley, sod in water, to five men a day, our drink cold water taken out of the river, which was at a flood verie salt, at low tide full of slime and filth . . . our men night and day groaning in every corner of the fort most pitiful to hear . . . some departing out of the world, many times three or four in a night; in the morning their bodies trailed out of their cabins like dogges to be buried.

Questions to Think About

1. What kinds of resources did colonists expect to find in Virginia? Who were the probable sources of information about Virginia?
2. What factors led to the overwhelmingly high mortality rate among the early Jamestown colonists?
3. **Identifying Alternatives** Given the background of the colonists and the era in which they lived, do you think any of the factors that contributed to the high death rate could have been prevented? Give reasons for your answer.