

The New World: Jamestown and the "Starving Time"

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Jamestown was the first permanent English settlement in America. This painting was done by National Park Service artist Sydney King. Photo from: MPI/Getty Images.

The first joint-stock company to launch a lasting venture to the New World was the Virginia Company of London. The investors had one goal in mind: gold. They hoped to repeat the success of Spanish settlers, who found gold in South America and brought it back to the Spanish Empire.

Britain's King James I had granted the Virginia Company a private charter, giving the company permission to set up a colony in the New World. Individuals invested in the Virginia Company to help fund the trip and the settlement. They hoped to receive a huge profit in return.

So 144 English men and boys sailed across the Atlantic Ocean. In 1607, they established the Jamestown colony, named after King James.

The colonists were told that if they did not generate any wealth, financial support for their efforts would end. Many of the men spent their days vainly searching for gold.

As a consequence, the colonists spent little time farming. Food supplies dwindled. Malaria and the harsh winter besieged the colonists as well. After the first year, only 38 of the original 144 had survived.

"Work Or Starve"

The colony may well have perished had it not been for the leadership of John Smith. He imposed strict discipline on the colonists. "Work or starve" was his motto, and each colonist was required to spend four hours per day farming.

An accidental gunpowder burn forced Smith to return to England in 1609. After his departure, the colony endured even more hardships. A new boatload of colonists and supplies sank off the coast of Bermuda on its way to help the hungry settlement. The winter of 1609-10, known as the "Starving Time," may have been the worst of all.

Disease and hunger ravaged Jamestown. Two desperate colonists were tied to posts and left to starve as punishment for raiding the colonies' stores. One colonist even took to cannibalism, eating his own wife. The fate of the venture was precarious. Yet still more colonists arrived, and their numbers included women.

Despite the introduction of tobacco cultivation, the colony was a failure as a financial venture. The king declared the Virginia Company bankrupt in 1624.

About 200,000 British pounds were lost among the investors. The charter was thereby revoked, and Virginia became a royal colony, the first in America to be ruled by the Crown.

Investments in permanent settlements were risky indeed. The merchants and gentry paid with their pocketbooks. Many colonists paid with their lives. For every six colonists who ventured across the Atlantic, only one survived.



Quiz

1 Select the paragraph from "Work Or Starve" that explains what happened after John Smith returned to England.

2 Based on the article, which of the following is TRUE?

- (A) John Smith made the colonists look for gold for four hours per day to improve the colony's financial situation.
- (B) John Smith made colonists farm for four hours a day to solve the colony's food shortage problem.
- (C) John Smith returned to England because he could not save the colony.
- (D) Supplies finally arrived to help the starving colonists soon after John Smith left.

3 Which detail from the text BEST supports the article's central idea?

- (A) Two desperate colonists were tied to posts and left to starve as punishment for raiding the colonies' stores.
- (B) The merchants and gentry paid with their pocketbooks.
- (C) The charter was thereby revoked, and Virginia became a royal colony, the first in America to be ruled by the Crown.
- (D) A new boatload of colonists and supplies sank off the coast of Bermuda on its way to help the hungry settlement.

4 What is the MAIN focus of the following paragraph?

Disease and hunger ravaged Jamestown. Two desperate colonists were tied to posts and left to starve as punishment for raiding the colonies' stores. One colonist even took to cannibalism, eating his own wife. The fate of the venture was precarious. Yet still more colonists arrived, and their numbers included women.

- (A) the hardships faced by Jamestown colonists because of food shortages
- (B) the increase in the number of colonists in Jamestown despite disease and food shortages
- (C) the diseases and harsh conditions of North America that took the colonists by surprise
- (D) the harsh punishment for breaking rules in Jamestown under John Smith's leadership