

The Struggles and Hardships of Early Jamestown

In 1607, a group of wealthy englishmen called The Virginia Company sailed across the ocean to the New World. Once the settlers got there, they immediately tried to find ways to make wealth. However, the colonists were killed off like flies. Struggles early on in the colony was the reason it barely succeeded. Some of these early struggles were disease, starvation, and poor leadership in the area they had settled.

Disease was one of the bigger contributing factors to the deaths of settlers in early Jamestown. This had to do with the location, sanitation, and the effect of the tides. The location was swampy, unsanitary, and disease ridden. According to the packet, "A Short History of Jamestown, and the "Mortality Rates" sheet, "the swampy location proved unhealthy. The water was unsanitary, and the tidal river brought brackish (salty) water from the ocean. These conditions caused illness so severe that men began to die almost daily. (Mortality Rates) Smith reports 'many dead, some sick.' Disease returns, 100 at Jamestown 'sickened and half the number died.'" In fact some of the disease and sickness was due to human waste lingering in the river and drought and the intrusion of saltwater within shallow drinking wells. The "Jamestown's Environment" sheet states, "English colonists dug shallow wells to supply themselves with sources of drinking water, but these were vulnerable to drought and salt water intrusion. Filth introduced into the river tended to fester rather than flush away." The marshy area proved fatal to the colonists. "Malaria and the harsh winter besieged the colonists, as well. After the first year, only 38 of the original 144 had survived" (ushistory.org). So the colonists had plenty of things around them that were

passing around diseases. However, the downside to these statements, is that they do not state exact numbers or diseases for analysis.

Another struggle the settlers faced was starvation. This was because there was drought, little or no farmers, and because of the brackish water. According to the drought analysis sheet, some of the long periods of drought were from about 1565-1575, and 1606-1613. Because of the colonists desire for gold, Jamestown did not have enough food to sustain itself very long before famine set in. According to livescience.com," Additionally, food supplies ran out, famine set in and a particularly harsh winter along with drought compounded the misery of the colonists." The colonists didn't start out with much food, so a period of drought time didn't help in growing crops, and fish in the rivers are only really present during the spring and summer. The website u-s-history.com states, "The root difficulty was that the colony needed soldiers, craftsmen and farmers, but instead was populated largely by self-important gentlemen unaccustomed to manual labor." The colonists did better under the governor John Smith. "The colony was resupplied, along with 100 new settlers, in January 1608. The colony would struggle on, hitting another low in the winter of 1609-1610, a period that became known as the 'starving time'"(livescience.com). However, by this time John Smith was shipped back to England after an accident, while the new governor was shipwrecked with needed supplies. After running out of food, the colonists resorted to eating animals (dogs, cats, and mice), and also practiced cannibalism by digging up the graves of the dead and eating them. At some point however, the colonists finally received help from Lord De La Warr. "As they set out to sea, however, they encountered a fleet led by Lord De La Warr, with fresh supplies and new colonists and they returned to Jamestown and repaired the fort." This was a good turning point in their lives living in the New World. Some of these points may be debatable and had things left out like the role of John Smith

when this was going on, and sort of how the starving time happened, but it was a short way of saying that they barely had food the entire time, until the end.

The other struggle they faced was poor leadership. The leadership started out with poor leaders and didn't really get better until John Smith, but then he had to leave because of an accident. The first leader in early Jamestown was Captain Newport. According to historyisfun.org, "In 1606, the Virginia Council gave Captain Christopher Newport 'sole charge and command' of all the persons aboard the three ships that set sail from England in December 1606 for Virginia. Newport was a seasoned mariner and had made several trips to the West Indies before accepting command of the Jamestown voyage. He made several trips back and forth from England to the colony bringing supplies. He also visited the paramount Indian chief Powhatan and his half-brother Opecanough in order to negotiate for provisions for the colony." However, after Newport, leadership slowly started to get worse, except for John Smith. It is stated on u-s-history.com, "during the winter of 1607-08, having fallen prey to malaria, typhoid fever, scurvy, and dysentery. The health crisis was compounded by bitter leadership feuds within the shrinking community." In fact, after reading the packet, "A Short History of Jamestown", it can be concluded that during the time in which many people were in charge at once, that it didn't really work out. In the packet, it talks about how the colonists had some of their problems during the "starving time" continue, as the all of the leaders were arguing; nothing ever got solved, helped, or done within the community. Unfortunately, after John Smith left, the colony continued to make old mistakes. The way the colonists did leaders however didn't change until 1619. "Among other things, Virginia residents were allowed to own land and enjoy representative government. The House of Burgesses met for the first time in 1619. Its somewhat limited role was to work with the governor and council to form laws for the colony." Even though the house of Burgesses

didn't have to do with early Jamestown, it was really close to today's government. Even though leaders like Lord De La Warr didn't really show up in these statements, and there wasn't much said about the different leaders and about them, during most of the early Jamestown period didn't have the best leaders that made the best choices.

In early Jamestown people died because of disease that lingered in the drinking water and the river, starvation because of the loss of farmers and drought, and because of poor leadership and the leaders' behavior and choices. There was cannibalism, mosquitoes, malaria, a lot of gentlemen and colonists with no known occupation, and besides John Smith and some others, most of the leaders didn't govern too well. Even now though, just analyzing and learning about early Jamestown, besides the statement that says we can learn from them to improve our lives and government, it is just fascinating to see how people in the past handled their hardships, struggles, and even colonies or nations. It's just a good thing to know. From looking at just the Virginia Company in charge of Jamestown, they didn't help at all too much and ended up going bankrupt at the end. So, could the Virginia Company have helped in a way that saved colonists' lives and helped live the dream of wealth?

Bibliography

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