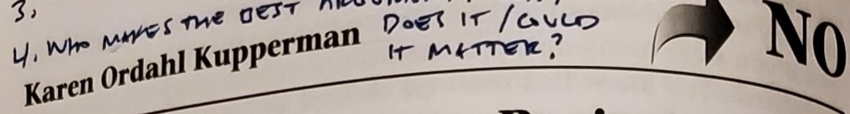

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The Jamestown Project

Introduction: Creation Myths

In May 1607 a party of just over a hundred men and boys landed on the James River in Virginia and planted the colony they named Jamestown in honor of the English king. The little colony struggled through a horrible first decade in which it barely held on before the settlers began to find their footing on the path that would lead to stability and, eventually, success. Jamestown has always occupied an equivocal position in American history. It is celebrated as the first permanent English settlement in the territory that would become the United States. These colonists planted the tiny seed from which would grow a powerful nation where all the world's people would mingle.

And yet Jamestown makes us uncomfortable. The portrait of it that has come down to us depicts greedy, grasping colonists in America and their arrogant backers in England. The settlement's first years were marked by belligerent intrusions on the Chesapeake Algonquians which manifested mainly the ignorance of the English. Within Jamestown, life degenerated into a shambles of death and despair. When John Rolfe finally developed a marketable crop—tobacco—the colonists exploited the land and one another in the scramble for profits. Ultimately they would institute slavery for imported Africans in their insatiable search for profits. This is the creation story from hell.

Americans prefer to think of Plymouth colony in New England as our true foundation. This 1620 settlement, also composed of just over a hundred people, was a puritan foundation; about half of the settlers were separatists, that is, puritans who considered the Church of England so hopelessly corrupt that they separated themselves from it completely. By contrast, the puritans who settled Massachusetts Bay a decade later remained nominally within the established church. The Pilgrims at Plymouth, in our agreed-upon national story, are portrayed as the direct opposites of the Jamestown group. They were humble people who wanted only a place to worship God as they saw fit, and they lived on terms of amity with one another and with the neighboring Indians, relationships memorialized in the First Thanksgiving. They occupied family farms and were content with self-sufficiency. These are the forebears we prefer to acknowledge.

The good origins versus bad origins dichotomy is a false one based on a whole series of faulty premises. *The Jamestown Project* reconstructs America's origin story by placing the Virginia colony within its true context. By examining the maelstrom of previous plans and experiences that converged on the James, we can see the genuine accomplishment that emerged from the apparent wreckage wrought by the planters, and the efforts of the rank and file who largely brought it about.

In fact, through a decade's trial and error, Jamestown's ordinary settlers and their backers in England figured out what it would take to make an English colony work. This was an enormous accomplishment achieved in a very short period of time, a breakthrough that none of the other contemporaneous ventures was able to make. The ingredients for success—widespread ownership of land, control of taxation for public obligations through a representative assembly, the institution of a normal society through the inclusion of women, and development of a product that could be marketed profitably to sustain the economy—were beginning to be put in place by 1618 and were in full operation by 1620, when the next successful colony, Plymouth, was planted. Thus the Pilgrims were able to be relatively successful (after a disastrous first year) because they had studied Jamestown's record and had learned its lessons. Jamestown was not just the earliest English colony to survive; its true priority lies in its inventing the archetype of English colonization. All other successful English colonies followed the Jamestown model.

England was a laggard in overseas ventures. By 1606, when the Virginia Company was organized and plans for the colony were laid, English merchants in collaboration with political leaders had begun to establish a role for their nation in the newly opening trades around the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and in the East. In these endeavors they were attempting to emulate, and often intrude on, the Spanish and Portuguese, united under the Spanish crown since 1580, who were the pioneers in creating the connections and bases through which trading operations were carried on.

New Spain was almost a century old when Jamestown was founded, and French traders had established firm partnerships with Indian nations in the fur trade along the St. Lawrence to the north. Spanish ships had scouted Chesapeake Bay repeatedly before concluding that the region would not repay the effort required to sustain settlement. The Spanish had planted St. Augustine on the Florida coast, and this, not Jamestown, was actually the first permanent European colony within the future United States; it was settled in 1565, almost half a century before Jamestown. And Santa Fe in New Mexico was founded shortly after Jamestown.

By 1607 English fishermen had been visiting the Newfoundland Banks and the New England coast for a century or more, and they built temporary settlements there, but no permanent English presence existed. In the last decades of the sixteenth century, a time when England and Spain were at war, English ships participated enthusiastically in privateering—licensed piracy against Spanish fleets traveling from the Caribbean to Seville. In the 1580s Sir Walter Ralegh's colony at Roanoke, within the Outer Banks of North Carolina, was initially designed to serve as a base for those patriotic privateers.

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The first group of settlers sent to Roanoke in 1585 conformed to the classic model: a group of young men under military authority. Their governor was Captain Ralph Lane. As always with such a design, Lane found the settlers, whom he characterized as the "wylde menn of myne owene nacione," hard to control and motivate. By the end of the colony's first winter, relationships with the coastal Carolina Algonquians, on whom they depended for food, had broken down completely. They deserted the site early the next summer, and Lane scorned the whole enterprise, writing that "the discovery of a good mine by the goodnesse of God, or a passage to the Southsea, or someway to it, and nothing els can bring this country in request to be inhabited by our nation."

Ralegh and his associates did not give up on Roanoke. In fact, they were the first to try the successful model. In 1587 they sent a new colony composed of families under civil government, and each family was promised a large estate to own in the new land. They were intended to settle on Chesapeake Bay near where Jamestown would eventually be planted; the Lane colony's explorations had convinced them that this would be a better location from which good commodities could be produced. But this plan had no lasting influence, for the colony was abandoned, and the planters became famous as the Lost Colonists of Roanoke. Ralegh, meanwhile, was overwhelmed by other commitments and, ultimately, by loss of his favored status at court. So although Roanoke's failure only temporarily dampened English enthusiasm for establishing American colonies, Jamestown had to learn its lessons anew.

England's late entry into the American sweepstakes spawned myriad ventures. The stark dichotomy of Jamestown and Plymouth would have been unintelligible to contemporaries. Virginia was one of many attempts, now largely forgotten, all up and down the coast as far north as the Arctic Circle and south into the Caribbean, floated by English promoters in the last years of Queen Elizabeth's reign and the early years under James I, who succeeded her in 1603. But colonization was expensive and had to be financed by private enterprise. In the absence of any sure source of return on that investment, America took last place in most promoters' minds, after endeavors in the Mediterranean, Africa, and the East, where profits were much more certain. The voyages actually sent out were a fraction of the number of schemes proposed by that class of people who became known as "projectors"—those who made a career out of spinning projects.

English venturers were very conscious of being newcomers in all these places where they sought a foothold, and the keynote of their activities was improvisation. Everywhere they went, they necessarily employed trial and error—and error often predominated. Promoters laid plans, but the ordinary people who carried them out, often very young men and women, were the ones who had to deal with realities on the ground and who ultimately founded a successful colony. Many involved in early-seventeenth-century America—Indians, Europeans, and Africans—had had experience of other Atlantic and Mediterranean regions before they came together on the James River. Often their experience was as captives, or as individuals left behind when the ships on which they had arrived departed hurriedly in the face of dangers ranging from armed resistance to violent Atlantic storms. Those who could improvise were the ones who survived. And the

knowledge of transatlantic others gained from these people informed planning and responses on all sides when Europeans attempted to create bases in America. All players brought vast experience, some relevant and some irrelevant, to the changed situations that European ventures created; and they drew on this experience, for good or ill, when confronted by the necessity of making choices.

When James I came to the throne and inaugurated a policy of reconciliation with Spain that ended the lucrative privateering war, prominent policy makers and merchants decided that they would try to sustain a permanent foundation across the Atlantic in the form of a Chesapeake colony. England's being a latecomer meant that its colonists had to take the parts of North America that were left, the places that other countries had rejected as less promising for the kinds of rich products that made the expensive project of colonization worthwhile. Backers knew that the region was not the best choice for the goals they had in mind; at about the same time Jamestown was founded, other companies attempted to plant colonies in Guiana, on various islands in the Caribbean, and in Newfoundland, as well as a colony in Maine. Other locations had been tried in the last decades of the sixteenth century in addition to Roanoke. Jamestown did not stand out in people's minds as a uniquely important venture, as we might expect it to have done.

Jamestown's site, on a peninsula jutting out into the James River some fifty miles upstream from Chesapeake Bay, was chosen with defense against Spanish attack in mind. As far as the Spanish were concerned, the colony was within their territory. They had attacked and eliminated an earlier French settlement on the southern coast. Although Spain and England were officially at peace in 1607, no one expected it to last, and the Virginia Company believed that its little plantation would be a natural target. Although planners were concerned about the response of the Indians on whom they would intrude, their main fear lay in the rivalry with Spain.

The Spanish did make constant efforts to find out what was going on in Jamestown—much of the surviving information available today in actually in Spanish correspondence—and several times seriously considered mounting an attack. Expectations of such an assault also contributed to the composition of the early contingents and plans for governing them. Like Roanoke's backers, the Virginia Company assumed that a group of young men under the command of high-ranking governors was the structure that would work best in the uncertain world of American ventures. After all, such an arrangement would most closely resemble the English society from which they came. But these hierarchical arrangements did not survive the transatlantic passage well, primarily because the colony could not replicate the social relationships on which they traditionally rested. Just as Roanoke's governor, Ralph Lane, found dealing with English savages his biggest problem, ultimately the company deemed brute force under martial law necessary to keep the Jamestown colonists in line.

REASON #1

It was the Chesapeake Algonquians who allowed Jamestown to become established as well as it did at the outset. The land on which the English settled belonged to the Paspahegh tribe, and the Paspaheghs, not surprisingly, deemed their presence unwelcome. Slowly the newcomers came to understand that many polities around Chesapeake Bay were under the influence of one great overlord, whom they came to know as Powhatan. The colonists called him an emperor, the closest European equivalent, but Powhatan was actually his title; eventually they were told that his given name was Wahunsenacawh. His daughter, whom we know by her nickname Pocahontas, became a principal intermediary between the cultures. Later the English learned two given names for her: Amonute and Matoaka.

Wahunsenacawh knew a great deal about Europeans in 1607. The Indians had seen many transatlantic voyagers over the course of the preceding century and understood well their strengths and weaknesses, and their aspirations and fears. They knew that Europeans, because they were so vulnerable, tended to overreact when they felt threatened, so American leaders had developed a series of strategies for handling them. Not only had these people encountered many ships that had sailed in and out of the bay in the sixteenth century, but also at least one man, Paquiquineo, had lived in Spanish colonies and even in Spain for a decade before returning in 1570 to his home at Paspahegh, the site of Jamestown. There is no question that the ramshackle Jamestown colony would have been cut off had the Indians decided to eliminate it. During the early years the men were dependent on the region's native people for their food supply, and relationships with the hard-pressed Indians grew increasingly tense, replicating the pattern at Roanoke.

The problems in the early years at Jamestown stemmed from actors on all sides drawing inappropriate lessons from previous encounters. Wahunsenacawh and his advisers did not foresee the eventual growth of the colony; they assumed that it would always be easy to manipulate this motley group, and that the little settlement could serve as a valuable source of tools, weapons, and other European manufactured goods. For their part, Jamestown's leaders, who were increasingly drawn from men with military experience in Europe's religious wars, believed that they could construct a society by enforcing sufficiently strict discipline, as they had done with English troops abroad. In the event, they were all wrong. Instead, the outcome grew from the trial-and-error efforts of the many ordinary people, most lost to the records, who found a way to build a society.

Only by examining the experience of all these people from around the Atlantic can we understand how and why Jamestown, however imperfectly, managed to hold on until it found the formula for recreating a successful version of English society abroad. Once that formula was devised, then all other colonies, beginning with Plymouth, had a much easier time of it and gained stability much more quickly. Jamestown's contribution was to develop the model for a true English colony, one that would actually work in America. This plan evolved out of the welter of failed experiments, false starts, and blind violence that characterized these early years. No one could say in 1607 how to make an English plantation in America function or even why investment in such a project was worthwhile. In the space of about a decade, some people, mainly those actually in Virginia, figured out what it would take and how to raise the revenue necessary

to sustain English backers' interest. The results continued to be messy, and many people suffered. But the outlines of a genuinely American society, with all its virtues and defects, first emerged along the James.

So, why does Virginia look so bad? One reason was its site, which proved to be a very poor choice for promoting the well-being of the people who tried to live there. The period during which both Roanoke and Jamestown were founded was a time of environmental crisis that made establishing thriving settlements even more difficult than it should have been. Alonso Suárez de Toledo urged Spain's King Philip II not to worry about other Europeans trying to settle on North America's east coast: "What would happen to foreigners there who must bring their subsistence from a great distance to an inhospitable coast? The land itself would wage war on them." Jamestown was notoriously unhealthy, and the colonists made it more unwholesome by the way they operated their little society. The Spanish never attacked them, and their relationships with Chesapeake area Indians were crucial to the life of the settlement.

Another reason for Jamestown's bad reputation lies in the nature of the records, which consist largely of complaints, special pleading, and excuses sent by colonists back to their patrons in England. Most of the surviving records, not surprisingly, were produced by leaders on both sides of the Atlantic. The migrants had been sent over with notoriously unrealizable goals: to find a good source of wealth, preferably precious metals, or a passage to the Pacific and the riches of Asia. Prominent men in the colony, faced with the problem of explaining why they were not sending back the rich products investors demanded, or why they had not found the passage to the Pacific, could not speak the simple truth: that getting started is extremely difficult, and they would need support for many years just to become established before any valuable products could be expected. Investors in the seventeenth century looked to the next quarterly report as much as those in the twenty-first, and they had the choice of many other potential ventures from which the returns were more secure. Had they known that Virginia would absorb money over many years with no profit, the colony would have been abandoned at the outset—as so many others were. From the company's point of view, the colony was nothing but a drain on its resources, eating up huge amounts of money in supplies and new settlers without ever repaying the backers' investment, much less returning a profit.

The colonists, for their part, desperately wrote letter after letter explaining that colonization was hard, that they had to get set up before they could become self-sustaining, and that they needed support while they did that. Once they were established, then there would be time to make the efforts required to find a source of profit; but it was foolish and counterproductive to pressure them to do it at the beginning. One unspoken message ran through all these reports: Please do not abandon us. Unable to tell the truth in the early struggling years—or even to be sure what the truth was—colonial leaders blamed one another, and especially the rank and file, who were characterized in much of the correspondence as "the scum of the earth." Elites did not know how to organize and motivate

them for the necessary work; they simply blamed the men for not acting as they wanted them to. Difficulties in controlling the colonists exacerbated the worsening relationship between the settlers and the Indians on whom they depended, though the leaders blamed the Indians on whom they had intruded for not supporting the colony with food as they wished.

But these same records, if we read beyond the surface noise of complaint and charge and countercharge, demonstrate that some people on the ground were drawing on the Atlantic and Mediterranean experience many had brought to the colony and were improvising relationships with the people and the land that finally achieved a measure of stability and growth in the colony. Often it was just this sort of improvisation, undertaken by ordinary people, that made elites nervous brought forth their accusations of malfeasance. Whereas many of the leaders whose vitriol figures so prominently in the records left the Chesapeake to promote and participate in other ventures after a few years, ordinary colonists were the ones who set about the task of building families and family farms. The other ventures attempted in the first decade of the seventeenth century all failed. The truly remarkable thing about Jamestown is that it somehow survived through years of hardship and discouragement until a few settlers finally embarked on the course to success at the end of the 1610s. This book is an examination of the various kinds of experiences and backgrounds that came together in the Jamestown project to make this improbable survival—and the evolution of the successful archetype—possible. . . .

Underneath the flurry of charges and countercharges, and with new kinds of evidence becoming available, one can see signs that normal patterns were increasingly possible as colonists made lives for themselves. Archaeological investigation has demonstrated that the colonists really were engaged in the kinds of diversified production that the company kept calling for, and that this engagement actually intensified after company control ended. As Ralph Hamor had testified, a genuine town was begun to the east of the fort in about 1618; a trained surveyor laid out twelve-acre lots for "James Cittie" in the early 1620s, and settlers were soon moving out beyond the confines of the city to the island's eastern end. Moreover, they had started building in brick. All the leading colonists lived clustered together in the "New Town." Archaeologists have uncovered signs of extensive mercantile activity and have excavated the workshop of gunsmith John Jackson, who took pity on Richard Frethorne in Jamestown. Foundations of shops specializing in pottery making, brewing, and apothecary work have also been unearthed. Governor Wyatt and George Sandys fostered the beginning of some industries; the great period of varied production on the island occurred after 1625 and continued through the 1630s. John Harvey, who arrived in 1623 after three years in Guiana and became governor in 1628, particularly pushed for such development.

Moreover, documentary excavations have discovered records of genuine communities composed of families growing up away from Jamestown—near the mouth of the James River and upriver close to the falls, and on the Eastern Shore, where Thomas Savage had taken up residence and established a family. These communities, like contemporary Plymouth in New England, increasingly resembled English country villages. The census ordered in 1624 as part of the royal investigation revealed that the planters who had been in America the longest were most likely to have families. Although the planned college never materialized, Bernard Symmes, one of the separatist puritans in Virginia, endowed the first free school in English America in 1634.

As we draw conclusions about the nature of Virginia's founding years, Bernard Symmes presents a challenge to received wisdom. It is a shock to learn that that the first English commitment to provide free education was in Virginia. Moreover, the Virginia Company's great planned effort to carry Christianity to the Indians, with contributions from many people on both sides of the Atlantic, was unique. Nothing on that scale was thought of again until the creation of formal organizations such as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel at the end of the seventeenth century.

Because attention then focused on the revocation of the Virginia Company's charter and charges against the leadership, the first lesson of the great attack of 1622—that Chesapeake Algonquians might welcome an English presence for the "book of the world" but would resist attempts to introduce the "book of the spirit"—was lost, as it had been with the sixteenth-century Jesuit mission and Don Luis/Paquiquineo's rejection of Christianity. Instead colonists drew conclusions about the Indians' fundamental nature and foresaw a future of separation more than convergence.

The colonists' level of engagement in economic pursuits, together with their growing ability to produce a marketable tobacco crop, also led to the 1622 rupture as the Chesapeake Algonquians came to understand how threatening a fully established and expanding English presence would be to their traditional life and its necessary land base. It would have been extremely difficult to predict in 1617 that the colony would grow so dramatically in the coming years. Thus it was not their stupidity and fecklessness but the beginnings of colonists' success that led Opechancanough to try to extirpate them. The 1630s saw a massive English migration into the Chesapeake, overwhelming Indian attempts to control the terms of relationships.

The Chesapeake remained a dangerous place for newcomers, and many died in their first few years, the seasoning period. Those who survived to finish their terms of servitude joined or helped to establish the communities growing up along the James or on the Eastern Shore. Some men who had been able to establish themselves early on added incrementally to their acreage by paying servants' passage over; in gaining the fifty-acre headright for each servant, they laid the foundation for future large plantations. But in these decades most farms were a few hundred acres or less. For the fortunate ones who survived the early years and were able to marry, the opportunity to have a farm of their own represented realization of an American dream.

It was Captain John Smith who, most prominently among his contemporaries, drew the true lessons of the Jamestown experience. After he left Virginia he spent the rest of his life, except for a brief trip to New England in 1614, at home writing about colonization. New England, then called Norembega, had been

deemed a hostile environment after the failure of the Sagadahoc colony in the frozen winter of 1607. Smith coined the name "New England," one of the great propaganda strokes in American history, to bolster his contention that the northern environment was healthier for English bodies and more conducive to English life than the Chesapeake. He wrote several books about his and others' American experiences and in 1624, as the government was investigating the Virginia Company, he expanded on all he had written in his great work, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England and the Summer Isles*. This was the first book that analyzed the whole record of English colonization in America and drew its lessons; in its conclusion he lamented his own inability to convince investors of the right way to proceed. He wrote that American ventures had been "my children, for they have beene my Wife, my Hawks, Hounds, my Cards, my Dice, and in totall, my best content."

Smith died at the age of fifty-one in 1631. In his last years he published two smaller books. One was his autobiography, where he told the story of his early life and Turkish captivity for the first time and brought the *Generall Historie* up to date. Then in his final year, as the huge fleet for Massachusetts Bay was gathering, he wrote a more philosophical book, *Advertisements For the unexperienced Planters of New-England, or any-where*. In this book he reiterated a case he had been making for some time: that fishing, the economic base on which New England was to be founded, was far more secure than illusory searches for gold or a passage to Asia—or a nonessential product like tobacco. America needed people who were not afraid to get their hands dirty. "Let not the meanness of the word fish distaste you." He maintained that the sea was as rich as the great silver mine at Potosí, and the fish stocks, unlike mines, were a renewable resource.

Although his book was addressed to Massachusetts Bay's founders—and there is some evidence that they read his books—his plan was drawn from analysis of Virginia's record, especially the revised program after 1618. His central theme, the sum of all experience thus far, was that colonization succeeded only where each family had a stake in the outcome and where merchants rather than aristocrats did the planning. He counseled New England's leaders "not to stand too much upon the letting, setting, or selling those wild Countries, nor impose too much upon the commonalty . . . for present gain." Rather, they should weld colonists to the project by giving each man as much land as he could reasonably manage for "him and his heires for ever."

All colonization projects, whether in Ireland or in America, had grappled with the fundamental question of how policy makers could motivate and control populations of migrants. Virginia's early history, especially as it was formulated out of the complaints and unrealistic claims on all sides, has been deemed a dismal tale of failure. Even the most severe martial law could not force colonists to thrive and lead productive lives. But, as John Smith explained to this readers, the Jamestown experience had produced a fundamental understanding about human psychology. Devolution—transfer of control to America—and fostering initiative on colonists' own account were the answer to all those questions about how to motivate people and create new societies. The key to building English societies abroad, however messy and incomplete, was discovered in Virginia and all successful colonies henceforth followed its model.