

THE GENERAL HISTORY OF VIRGINIA

John Smith

BACKGROUND The Jamestown colony was modeled after a military expedition, transplanting about 100 hardy men into the Virginia wilderness in May 1607. Five members of Jamestown's ruling council—Edward Wingfield, Bartholomew Gosnold, John Ratcliffe, George Kendall, and John Smith—soon found themselves wrestling for control of the colony. As Smith's account opens, the colonists' ships have returned to England for supplies, leaving the men to survive on their own.

ANALYZE VISUALS

Which details of this map do not seem realistic? Explain what helps you distinguish accurate details from fictitious ones.

The Struggle for Jamestown

Being thus left to our fortunes, it fortuned that within ten days, scarce ten amongst us could either go or well stand, such extreme weakness and sickness oppressed us. And thereat none need marvel if they consider the cause and reason which was this: While the ships stayed, our allowance was somewhat bettered by a daily proportion of biscuit which the sailors would pilfer to sell, give, or exchange with us for money, sassafras, furs, or love. But when they departed, there remained neither tavern, beer-house, nor place of relief but the common kettle. Had we been as free from all sins as [we were free from] gluttony and drunkenness we might have been canonized
10 for saints, but our President [Edward Wingfield] would never have been admitted for engrossing to his private, oatmeal, sack, oil, aqua vitae, beef, eggs, or what not but the kettle; that indeed he allowed equally to be distributed, and that was half a pint of wheat and as much barley boiled with water for a man a day, and this, having fried some twenty-six weeks in the ship's hold, contained as many worms as grains so that we might truly call it rather so much bran than corn; our drink was water, our lodgings castles in the air. **A**

6 sassafras: A kind of tree believed to have medical properties.

8 common kettle: food that was available to everyone.

11 engrossing to his private: taking for his private use; **sack:** wine; **aqua vitae:** brandy.

A OLDER TEXTS

Using the side notes, restate lines 8–12 in modern English. What joke is Smith making?

With this lodging and diet, our extreme toil in bearing and planting palisades so strained and bruised us and our continual labor in the extremity of the heat had so weakened us, as were cause sufficient to have made us as miserable in our native country or any other place in the world.

From May to September, those that escaped lived upon sturgeon and sea crabs. Fifty in this time we buried; the rest seeing the President's projects to escape these miseries in our pinnace by flight (who all this time had neither felt want nor sickness) so moved our dead spirits as we **deposed** him and established Ratcliffe in his place (Gosnold being dead), Kendall deposed. Smith newly recovered, Martin and Ratcliffe were by his care preserved and relieved, and the most of the soldiers recovered with the skillful diligence of Master Thomas Wotton our surgeon general. ⓐ

But now was all our provision spent, the sturgeon gone, all helps abandoned, each hour expecting the fury of the savages, when God, the patron of all good endeavors, in that desperate extremity so changed the hearts of the savages that they brought such plenty of their fruits and provision as no man wanted.

The new President [Ratcliffe] and Martin, being little beloved, of weak judgment in dangers, and less **industry** in peace, committed the managing of all things abroad to Captain Smith, who, by his own example, good words, and fair promises, set some to mow, others to bind thatch, some to build houses, others to thatch them, himself always bearing the greatest task for his own share, so that in short time he provided most of them lodgings, neglecting any for himself. . . . ⓑ

A Surprise Attack

Smith, perceiving (notwithstanding their late misery) not any regarded but from hand to mouth, (the company being well recovered) caused the pinnace to be provided with things fitting to get provision for the year following, but in the **interim** he made three or four journeys and discovered the people of Chickahominy, yet what he carefully provided the rest carelessly spent.

Wingfield and Kendall, living in disgrace strengthened themselves with the sailors and other confederates to regain their former credit and authority, or at least such means aboard the pinnace (being fitted to sail as Smith had appointed for trade), to alter her course and to go for England.

Smith, unexpectedly returning, had the plot discovered to him, much trouble he had to prevent it, till with the store of saker and musket shot he forced them [to] stay or sink in the river: which action cost the life of Captain Kendall.

These brawls are so disgustful, as some will say they are better forgotten, yet all men of good judgment will conclude it were better their baseness should be manifest to the world, than the business bear the scorn and shame of their excused disorders.

19 palisades: walls made of tall, pointed wooden stakes.

24 pinnace: a small sailing ship.

depose (dī-pōz') v. to remove from rule

ⓐ OLDER TEXTS

Reread lines 27–28. Clarify the pronoun referent for the word *his* in line 27. Who is responsible for healing Martin and Ratcliffe?

industry (īn'de-strē) n. hard work; diligence

37 abroad: outside the palisades.

ⓑ NARRATOR

Reread lines 35–41. Do Smith's claims sound more or less credible than they would if stated by a **first-person narrator**? Give reasons for your answer.

interim (īn'ter-īm) n. period in between; interval

46 Chickahominy (chī'kə-hā'mə-nē): a river in Virginia.

52 discovered: revealed.

53 saker: cannon shot.

55 Captain Kendall: Kendall was executed for mutiny in 1607.

57–59 it were . . . disorders: It is better to reveal the troublemakers than to have the "business" of the colony get a bad name.

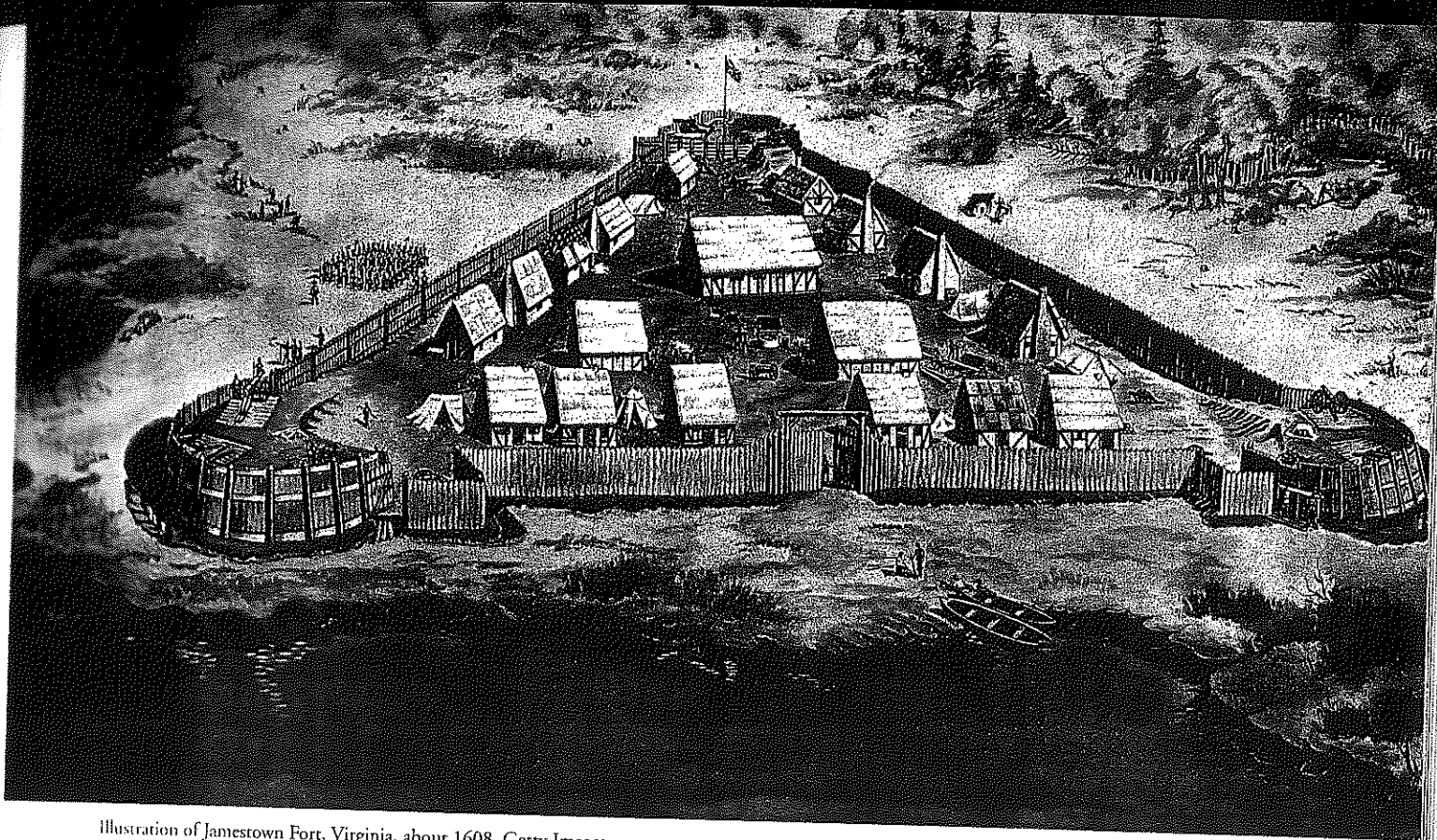


Illustration of Jamestown Fort, Virginia, about 1608. Getty Images.

60 The President and Captain Archer not long after intended also to have abandoned the country, which project also was curbed and suppressed by Smith.

The Spaniard never more greedily desired gold than he [Smith] victual, nor his soldiers more to abandon the country than he to keep it. But [he found] plenty of corn in the river of Chickahominy, where hundreds of savages in divers places stood with baskets expecting his coming.

And now the winter approaching, the rivers became so covered with swans, geese, ducks, and cranes that we daily feasted with good bread, Virginia peas, pumpkins, and putchamins, fish, fowl, and divers sort of wild
70 beasts as fast as we could eat them, so that none of our tuftaffety humorists desired to go for England.

But our comedies never endured long without a tragedy, some idle exceptions being muttered against Captain Smith for not discovering the head of Chickahominy river and [he being] taxed by the Council to be too slow in so worthy an attempt. The next voyage he proceeded so far that with much labor by cutting of trees asunder he made his passage, but when his barge could pass no farther, he left her in a broad bay of danger of shot, commanding none should go ashore till his return, himself with two English and two savages went up higher in a canoe, but he was not long absent but
80 his men went ashore, whose want of government gave both occasion and opportunity to the savages to surprise one George Cassen whom they slew and much failed not to have cut off the boat and all the rest.

60 Captain Archer: Gabriel Archer had abandoned the colony and then returned. He did not support Smith.

63 victual: food.

69 putchamins: persimmons.

70 tuftaffety humorists: unreliable face-wearers

73 exceptions: objections.

80-82 whose want . . . the rest: the men's lack of discipline in going ashore led to the surprise attack on Cassen; only by some failure on the attackers' side did the others survive.

Smith little dreaming of that accident, being got to the marshes at the river's head twenty miles in the desert, had his two men [Robinson and Emry] slain (as is supposed) sleeping by the canoe, while himself by fowling sought them victual, who finding he was beset with 200 savages, two of them he slew, still defending himself with the aid of the savage his guide, whom he bound to his arms with his garters and used him as a buckler, yet he was shot in his thigh a little, and had many arrows that stuck in his clothes but no great hurt, till at last they took him prisoner. . . . ①

At Powhatan's Court

At last they brought him to Werowocomoco, where was Powhatan, their Emperor. Here more than two hundred of those grim courtiers stood wondering at him, as [if] he had been a monster, till Powhatan and his train had put themselves in their greatest braveries. Before a fire upon a seat like a bedstead, he sat covered with a great robe made of raccoon skins and all the tails hanging by. On either hand did sit a young wench of sixteen or eighteen years and along on each side [of] the house, two rows of men and behind them as many women, with all their heads and shoulders painted red, many of their heads bedecked with the white down of birds, but every one with something, and a great chain of white beads around their necks.

At his entrance before the King, all the people gave a great shout. The Queen of Appomattoc was appointed to bring him water to wash his hands, and another brought him a bunch of feathers, instead of a towel, to dry them; having feasted him after their best barbarous manner they could, a long consultation was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan; then as many as could, laid hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head and being ready with their clubs to beat out his brains, Pocahontas, the King's dearest daughter, when no **entreaty** could prevail, got his head in her arms and laid her own upon his to save him from death, whereat the Emperor was contended he should live to make him hatchets, and her bells, beads, and copper, for they thought him as well of all occupations as themselves. For the King himself will make his own robes, shoes, bows, arrows, pots; plant, hunt, or do anything so well as the rest.

Two days after, Powhatan, having disguised himself in the most fearfullest manner he could, caused Captain Smith to be brought forth to a great house in the woods and there upon a mat by the fire to be left alone. Not long after, from behind a mat that divided the house, was made the most dolefullest noise he ever heard; then Powhatan more like a devil than a man, with some two hundred more as black as himself, came unto him and told him now that they were friends, and presently he should go to Jamestown to send him two great guns and a grindstone for which he would give him the country of Capahowasic and forever esteem him as his son Nantaquoud.

So to Jamestown with twelve guides Powhatan sent him. That night they quartered in the woods, he still expecting (as he had done all this long time of his imprisonment) every hour to be put to one death or other, for all

84 desert: wilderness; 85–86 by fowling . . . victual: hunted birds to find them food.

88 garters: shirtlaces; buckler: shield.

① NARRATOR

Reread lines 83–90. What details does the narrator include that suggest Smith is not responsible for the deaths of the two men?

94 greatest braveries: fanciest clothes.

102 the Queen of Appomattoc (ăp'ə-măt'ək): the leader of the nearby village of Appomattoc.

entreaty (ĕn-trĕ'tē) *n.* plea

112 as well . . . themselves: The Indians thought Smith had varied skills as they did.

122–123 the country of Capahowasic (căp'ə-hou'ə-sĭk') . . . Nantaquoud (năntə'kwăd): Powhatan would give Smith control of a nearby village and also promised to think as highly of him as he did of his own son.

their feasting. But almighty God (by His divine providence) had **mollified** the hearts of those stern barbarians with compassion. The next morning betimes they came to the fort, where Smith having used the savages with what kindness he could, he showed Rawhunt, Powhatan's trusty servant, two demi-culverins and a millstone to carry [to] Powhatan; they found them somewhat too heavy, but when they did see him discharge them, being loaded with stones, among the boughs of a great tree loaded with icicles, the ice and branches came so tumbling down that the poor savages ran away half dead with fear. But at last we regained some conference with them and gave them such toys and sent to Powhatan, his women, and children such presents as gave them in general full content. **E**

Now in Jamestown they were all combustion, the strongest preparing once more to run away with the pinnace; which, with the hazard of his life, with saker falcon and musket shot, Smith forced now the third time to stay or sink.

Some, no better than they should be, had plotted with the President the next day to have him put to death by the Levitical law, for the lives of Robinson and Emry; pretending the fault was his that had led them to their ends; but he quickly took such order with such lawyers that he laid them by the heels till he sent some of them prisoners for England.

Now every once in four or five days, Pocahontas with her attendants brought him so much provision that saved many of their lives, that else for all this had starved with hunger.

His relation of the plenty he had seen, especially at Werowocomoco, and of the state and bounty of Powhatan (which till that time was unknown), so revived their dead spirits (especially the love of Pocahontas) as all men's fear was abandoned.

Thus you may see what difficulties still crossed any good endeavor; and the good success of the business being thus oft brought to the very period of destruction; yet you see by what strange means God hath still delivered it. **E**

mollify (mŏl'ə-fī') v. to soothe; to reduce in intensity

131 demi-culverins
(dĕm'ĕ-kŭl'vər-ĭnz): large cannons.

E OLDER TEXTS

Reread lines 128–137. **Paraphrase** this passage to clarify its meaning. What does Smith do to keep his promise to Powhatan?

143 Levitical law: According to the Book of Leviticus in the Bible, "He that killeth any man shall surely be put to death."

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