



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on August 8, 2019

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## 1619 A Vital Year in the History of Virginia — and America

For 13 years, until the arrival of the English Separatists known as the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock in what is now in Massachusetts in 1620, Virginia was British America. Yet, while almost every child has heard of the *Mayflower* that brought the Pilgrims, very few Americans can name any of the *three* ships that carried the 105 English settlers to Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. (They were the *Discovery*, *Godspeed*, and *Susan Constant*.)



Yet, the centrality of Virginia in American history is profound. The first cash crop of English America (tobacco) was developed there. A Virginian, George Washington, was the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. Another Virginian, Thomas Jefferson, was the principal author of the Declaration of Independence. James Madison, yet another Virginian, made such extensive contributions to the Constitution that he rightly deserves the title of “father of the Constitution.”

Four of the first five presidents of the United States were from Virginia.

But the Virginia colony, a commercial venture by the London Company, with a charter from the British government, barely survived. A previous effort to establish a colony in 1587 at Roanoke Island in what is now North Carolina had already failed, with the apparent loss of all lives. (The exact reasons remain a mystery.)

Then, in 1619, three separate events occurred that were critical in shaping the history of Virginia, and indeed of British America as a whole. For it was in that year that 90 women arrived from England, ensuring that the colony’s economy would consist of settlers, not just traders; the first Africans arrived, permanently changing the course of American history to the present day; and the establishment of the first colonial assembly, consisting of an upper house of the governor and his council, and a lower house, called the House of Burgesses, established the right of Virginians to rule themselves on many important matters, notably in the area of taxation.

The power to determine the amount and types of taxes through the elected representatives of the colonists was just one among the bundle of rights enjoyed by Englishmen at the time known as “the rights of Englishmen.” This guarantee, that a man would enjoy all of these “rights” as though he were still living in England, no doubt contributed to the growth of Virginia, and eventually all the British Colonies on the Atlantic coast of America. The rallying cry of the American Revolution would be “No taxation without representation,” when the British Parliament moved to directly tax the colonists without their consent.

After the Spanish failed in their attempt in 1588 to invade England with their supposedly Invincible Armada, King James I opted to challenge the Spanish claims to the east coast of North America, arguing that the English had a better claim, based on the 1497 voyage of James Cabot for England, when Cabot had sailed from Bristol, England, to Newfoundland. James granted a charter, a written agreement



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stipulating certain grants and rights, to the London Company in 1606. The charter allowed settlement in a block of land one hundred miles square, located somewhere between 34 and 41 north latitude. A second charter in 1609 expanded the grant of land to include not only 400 miles along the Atlantic coast, but also “from sea to sea, west and northwest.”

## **Jamestown Survives**

Early difficulties threatened the survival of the tiny settlement named for the king. For one thing, the government of the colony was in the hands of the London Company, which directed the colonists to hunt for gold, rather than begin farming the land. Add to that that there were no skilled farmers in the first boats, and half were “gentlemen,” minor nobles who did not believe in working with their hands, and disaster seems to have been a foregone conclusion.

The colonists soon faced starvation. Some even resorted to digging up corpses in an effort to survive. One man murdered his own wife, then cut her into pieces and salted her. When his crime was discovered, he was burned at the stake. It is no wonder that it was more than a decade before any other women chose to come to Jamestown from England.

Several circumstances combined to nearly cause the settlement to be aborted in its infancy. Swarms of mosquitoes emerged from the swamps around Jamestown, and a resulting malarial outbreak killed many. A journal by one of the settlers in the summer of 1607 details the grim history of those first few months: “The sixth of August there died John Asbie of the bloody flux. The ninth day died George Flower of the swelling. The tenth day died William Brewster of a wound given by the savages.” Another colonist recorded similar recollections of the difficult time, writing, “There were never Englishmen left in a foreign country in such misery as we are in this new discovered Virginia.” Within six months, more than half the colonists were dead.

Those whom the settlers called “the savages” were the indigenous tribe led by Chief Powhatan. The Indians contributed both to the death toll among the English, and to their survival. Powhatan’s daughter, Pocahontas, took a liking to the English, bringing them corn and even warning the colonists of an impending attack by some Indians who resented what they considered an intrusion into their homeland. Her eventual marriage to tobacco planter John Rolfe produced years of improved relations between her people and the English.

Before meeting and marrying John Rolfe, however, she had developed a friendship with one of the colony’s first leaders, John Smith. At only 28 years of age, Smith ordered the able-bodied men, regardless of social status, to go into the fields and work, or they would be cut off from all food from the common storehouse. The London Company had established a system of communal ownership of the land, where each settler was to work according to his ability, and take from the common storehouse, according to his needs. Such a system — like all socialist arrangements — was, of course, doomed to failure, resulting in Smith’s changes.

One planter, Ralph Hamor, offered an explanation: “When our people were fed out of the common store, and labored jointly in the manuring of the ground, and planting corn, glad was that man that could slip from his labor, nay the most honest of them in a general business, would take so much faithful and true pains, in a week, as now he will do in a day.” It is a lesson that many of our modern politicians and their socialistic supporters seem to have forgotten — if they ever knew it.



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In the meantime, Smith obtained corn from the Indians. Chief Powhatan liked the houses the English built for themselves, and traded corn to get them to build him one like theirs. After Smith returned to England, the colony still seemed doomed, but it didn't flounder. Two reasons have been suggested for its survival. First, Sir Thomas Dale became governor of the colony and ended the practice of putting all the produce into a common storehouse. Despite Smith's harsh edict — if a person would not work, he would not eat, even using flogging to encourage work — force still did not solve the problem of slackers. Instead, under Dale, each man was allotted three acres of land to cultivate and reap as he saw fit. The amazing result was a rapid increase in the production of food.

Dale promulgated a very harsh law code — which would be greatly mitigated in 1619 by the first elected assembly in the colony — which included the death penalty for swearing, for unlicensed trade with the Indians, and for anyone rebelling against the rule of the governor (they would be broken on the wheel). Attendance at worship services of the established Anglican Church was required, with persistent non-attendants facing a hangman's noose. Yet, despite these harsh laws, Dale's decision to allow each settler to farm his own land and keep its produce resulted in a predictably more prosperous colony.

Thus, the second reason the colony survived: Rolfe experimented with growing tobacco. Tobacco eventually became the great cash crop of Virginia — and it would not have come about if Dale had not already ended the communal system used before his governorship. Rolfe would have had no incentive to experiment with tobacco under the communal system.

## **The Arrival of Women**

By 1619, Virginia had survived for 12 years, but the men had become restless. Obtaining a wife among the local Indians may have worked for Rolfe, but the other men were not so fortunate. They made their agitation — lack of women to marry — known to the London Company, which understood this was a situation in need of rectifying, not just for the sake of the men, but for the long-term permanence of the colony.

Ninety women, carefully selected, were recruited and sent to the New World to provide wives for the men. To be eligible to marry one of these women, the colonist had to agree to pay the company's investors 120 pounds of tobacco to cover the transportation costs across the Atlantic. Next, a man had to gain a woman's consent. Within a month of their arrival, all the women were married, with some marrying the day they got off the ship.

Now, the institution of home and family — long understood as the cornerstone of civilization — was planted in English America.

Bernard Bailyn, writing in his book *The Barbarous Years* on the peopling of British North America before 1675, said the London Company understood the need for women in the colony to tie the men's minds to Virginia "by the bonds of wives and children." An investment was therefore made by the owners of the Company to subsidize the shipping of "young handsome and honestly educated maids ... to be disposed in marriage to the most honest and industrious planters."

According to Bailyn, most of the women were orphans in their early 20s, or perhaps their late teens, and unemployed. How "handsome" they were is uncertain, and subjective in any case, but many did have some tentative ties to minor nobility. One, Katherine Finch, whose mother and father were both



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dead, was the 23-year-old sister of the king's crossbow maker. She was also a relative of Sir Edwin Sandys, one of the leading men of the colony. Another of the prospective brides was Joane Fletcher, a 25-year-old widow and the daughter of John Egerton, a gentleman. Of the 57 out of 90 women whose identities and circumstances were recorded, in only five cases was it clear that both parents were still living. They apparently were women with poor prospects in England, and became aware of the offer of a life beyond the ocean by the advertising campaign of the company.

The company also provided the women with "clothes, bedding, food, and other supplies and gave instructions for their careful treatment upon arrival in the colony," Bailyn wrote in his book. The company also allowed some of the less well-to-do colonists to repay the company on credit.

The women came from all over England, with about one-fourth to one-third coming from around London. The remainder came from 19 of England's 39 counties. Four women came from Wales.

Wherever they came from, without them it is quite possible the colony would have eventually failed. After their arrival, the level of civilization improved markedly, a testimony to the importance of the institutions of monogamous marriages and the family to the improvement of a society as men tend to act nobler and kinder in the company of women.

## **Creation of the Assembly**

The second historic event of 1619 was the creation of a representative body known as the House of Burgesses. The London Company directed that each of the 10 chief settlements, known as "burgs," elect two representatives to join with the governor and his council (chosen in England) to provide self-rule for the colony, making it the first such representative body in English America. Significantly, in line with their possession of all the rights of Englishmen as though they were still living in England, they were given the same right as Parliament to determine the level of taxation.

Not surprisingly, the representatives proudly kept their hats on as they entered the Jamestown Church building where the first meeting was held on July 30, 1619, adopting the custom of their British counterparts in Parliament. Paul Johnson described the scene in his *A History of the American People*: "Their first task was to go over Dale's Code, and improve it in the light of experience and popular will, which they did, 'sweating and stewing, and battling flies and mosquitoes' .... Thus, within a decade of its foundation, the colony had acquired a representative institution on the Westminster [English Parliament] model. There was nothing like it in any of the American colonies, be they Spanish, Portuguese or French."

The upper house consisted of the governor and his council, the latter chosen by the company, one of whom was Rolfe. The decisions of the council were made by majority vote, not by arbitrary decisions of the governor, although if the vote in the council resulted in a tie, the governor could cast the deciding vote. The council also served as the General Court, which heard cases arising under the law, drawing freely from the common law of England.

The lower house, the burgesses, was, James Horn writes in his book *1619*, "unquestionably a representative body."

According to Horn, the assembly had four principal tasks before them: to review the charter, laws, and privileges; to recommend which of the instructions granted to previous governors "might be conveniently drawn up into laws"; to consider private issues; and to determine which petitions should





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be drafted and sent to London for the company's consideration.

The assembly also enacted regulations concerning contracts and the production of crops such as corn, hemp, and silk. Other laws dealt with idleness and drunkenness. No doubt vividly aware of the importance of continued good relations with the Indians, who outnumbered them greatly, the assembly expressed a policy of maintaining the peace with them and promoting "the conversion of the Indians to the Christian religion." Realizing that such a policy might not be successful, they kept Dale's harsh penalties in place for providing weapons to their indigenous neighbors.

The effort to maintain peace and strive for the conversion of the Indians and the prohibition on trading firearms seemed prudent policies, for less than three years later, on Good Friday, 1622, Chief Opechancanough (brother of Powhatan, who died in 1618), launched a surprise and simultaneous attack on the several villages of Virginia Colony, killing more than 300 colonists. Only the warning of Chanco, an Indian who had become a Christian, to colonist Richard Pace, who passed the warning onto the governor, avoided perhaps the total extermination of the colony.

After only six days of work, the first meeting of the assembly was adjourned by Governor Sir George Yeardley, having successfully launched English America's first representative government.

## First Black Africans

About a month later, Yeardley became the largest purchaser of black Africans, although these men and women became indentured servants rather than slaves. Rolfe reported to Sir Edwin Sandys, a fellow member of the council, this third important event of 1619 on August 20: "A Dutch man of war of the burden of 160 tons arrived at Point Comfort, the commander's name Capt. Pope, his pilot for the West Indies one Mr. Marmaduke, an Englishman.... He [Pope] brought not anything but 20. And odd Negroes, which the Governor and Cape Merchant bought for victuals." Fifteen of the arrivals were obtained by Yeardley for his 1,000-acre plantation. As Paul Johnson observed in his *A History of the American People*, "These men were unfree though not, strictly speaking, slaves. They were indentured servants.... White laborers arrived from England under the same terms, signing their indentures, or making their mark on them, in return for passage to America. But in practice many indentured men acquired other financial obligations by borrowing money during their initial period of service, and thus had it extended."

The "politically correct" insist that these black Africans were not *really* indentured servants, but rather slaves from the beginning. A recent example of this assertion — that the first African arrivals were slaves, not indentured servants — happened in February of this year. Virginia Governor Ralph Northam, appearing on *CBS This Morning* with journalist Gayle King, said, "We are now at the 400-year anniversary — Just 90 miles [from] here in 1619, the first indentured servants from Africa landed on our shores in Old Point Comfort, what we call now Fort Monroe, and while..." before being interrupted by King, who interjected, "also known as slavery."

Northam opted to say, "Yes," rather than give King a history lesson.

Leslie Harris, a professor of African-American history at Northwestern University, retorted, "An indenture implies two people have entered into a contract with each other, but slavery is not a contract," which is true as far as it goes, but Northam's initial statement was more historically accurate. In 1625, the blacks were listed as servants, just like the white servants, in that year's census.



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No laws covering the institution of slavery in Virginia existed until the 1660s.

Some have argued that the blacks were slaves because “they weren’t paid.” Actually, lack of monetary compensation does not make a person a slave, as many people volunteer all the time to do uncompensated work for others. What makes a person a slave is the lack of choice, even if the person is paid (which slaves sometimes were, actually).

Historian Edmund Morgan, writing in *American Slavery, American Freedom*, asserted that the legal status of these first blacks in Virginia was no different than that of the white servants (which was admittedly not all that good). Seven years was the legal limit to the amount of time that an indentured servant could be held by a planter, and the indentured servant was granted 50 acres of land upon release. It is not certain what the ultimate fate was for the estimated 30 or so Angolans who became indentured in 1619. No doubt, some did not live until the end of their contract, but apparently some did obtain their 50 acres.

The introduction of the Africans into Virginia certainly led to eventual outright slavery, but there was nothing “peculiar” about the institution, as some like to say, calling slavery America’s “peculiar institution,” or even its “original sin.” Historian Kenneth Stampp even wrote a book entitled *Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*. But the fact is, the ugly practice of slavery was neither “peculiar” nor “original” to English America, or the later United States.

George Mason Economics Professor Walter E. Williams (who is of black African ancestry himself) took on this assertion directly in his syndicated column in May. “The favorite leftist tool for the attack on our nation’s founding is that slavery was sanctioned.... Slavery is one of the most horrible injustices,” Williams wrote, “but slavery is by no means peculiar, odd, unusual or unique to the U.S.” Horn, in his book *1619*, wrote, “By the time the first Africans arrived in Virginia, half a million slaves had already been shipped across the Atlantic to work in Spanish America and Brazil [Portugal’s New World colony].”

As Williams explained, slavery had existed for centuries, in all parts of the world, long before its existence in colonial Virginia. The exact history of the origins of slavery in Virginia is somewhat a mystery, but the arrival of the first black Africans in 1619 did set the stage for its important role in American history.

Most histories mention that it was a Dutch ship that brought those first blacks to Virginia in 1619, citing Rolfe. But it appears that Rolfe may have been mistaken, although that ship and another ship had apparently sailed from a Dutch port in 1619. Historians now believe that two English pirate ships had seized a Portuguese ship in the Gulf of Mexico, then transported the cargo, which included African slaves taken from what is now Angola, to Jamestown.

In the summer of 1619, these two ships, the *White Lion* and the *Treasurer*, captured the Portuguese vessel, the *São João Bautista*, taking 50 men and women off the ship. The *White Lion* arrived in Virginia first, soon followed by the *Treasurer*, both desperate to unload their stolen cargo, as there was no market at that time for African slaves in England.

The problem complicating the transaction was that there were no laws covering actual slavery in the colony — and there would not be any such laws for 40 more years — instead, there were only laws covering indentured servanthood. But, because the colony was in desperate need of more workers at the time, Yearly and Abraham Peirse traded supplies for the slaves, which they then made indentured servants.



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## Indentured Servants or Slaves?

While no doubt an unpleasant arrangement for the indentured servants, indentured servanthood was *not* slavery, and it is historical ignorance to say that it was. The master in an indentured servant situation owned the servant's labor, but not the person, as is the case with outright slavery. An indentured servant could look forward to his freedom from the contract and *his own land*, while a slave's status was for life. Finally, an indentured servant's children were not born into that status, but a slave's children were.

Interestingly, one Angolan, Anthony Johnson, not only survived his time of indenture, but became a tobacco planter himself upon his release. He married a female black servant and by 1651 he not only had a 250-acre farm, he also had five black indentured servants of his own. In 1654, one of these servants, John Casor, demanded his release and went to work for Robert Parker, a free white man. Johnson argued that Casor's time had not expired, and he won a lawsuit against Parker to regain the services of Casor.

The court punished Casor by extending his indenture for life, ironically making a former indentured servant from Africa (Johnson) among the first, if not the first, slaveowner, in Virginia. But this was merely a court-ordered case of involuntary servitude. It was not until 1670 that the colonial assembly enacted laws permitting any free person — white, black, or Indian — to own a black person as an outright slave.

It is also quite possible that some black indentured servants, who were almost all illiterate, were tricked into having their terms of indenture extended beyond the limit of seven years, even to life. But before the 1670s, it appears that most planters preferred indentured servants from England, rather than African slaves.

One question that has challenged historians is the question of whether racism preceded or followed slavery. Strong arguments have been made on either side of that question, but one can reasonably surmise that racist assumptions were certainly part of the "justification" for the enslavement of human beings of a different skin color. Whatever its exact origins in Virginia, the growth of slavery illustrates the reality of Lord Acton's maxim: Power tends to corrupt. Giving power over another human being — in either a master-slave relationship, or in a government official-citizen relationship — can lead to great abuse, as history has shown.

These three important events — the arrival of 90 women, the establishment of the assembly, and the introduction of the first black Africans into the colony — without question, make the year 1619 one of the most critical years not only in the history of Virginia, but in the history of the United States.

*Photo credit: traveler1116/DigitalVisionVectors/GettyImagesPlus*

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