

GREEN GOLD



By 1610, Jamestown seemed a total failure. Hundreds of its settlers were dead and all its money-making schemes in ruins. Then a man arrived who would change everything: John Rolfe.

The tobacco grown by the Indians in Virginia burned the throats of those who smoked it. Rolfe found a milder strain of tobacco on Trinidad, a Caribbean island far to the south of Virginia. In 1611, he brought this sweeter-tasting tobacco to Virginia. Soon Rolfe figured out the best way to grow it, and started selling tobacco to pipe smokers in England.

Tobacco took off. So many people wanted to grow it that colonists stopped planting crops to eat. By 1618, colonists were shipping more than 50,000 pounds of tobacco to England. The colony was finally turning a profit.

Originally, all the colony's land had belonged to the Virginia Company. But little by little, to encourage people to come to Virginia and to reward hard work, the company gave settlers their own pieces of property to farm. When the tobacco boom

Tobacco was the get-rich-quick crop that saved Jamestown. Settlers could plant in peace because of the marriage of John Rolfe to Pocahontas (above) daughter of a powerful Indian chief. This 1616 portrait shows her on a visit to England.

If the indentured servants who did most of Jamestown's labor lived long enough, they received freedom and often money and land. But their service was hard. Their masters could beat them and work them to exhaustion. A ship captain wrote that servants were bought and sold "like horses."



hit, the company gave free settlers—those who were not indentured servants—who were already in Virginia 100 acres of land. In addition, anyone who paid his or another's way to Virginia got 50 acres of land. And anyone who bought a share in the company got 100 acres of land.

These changes allowed rich people to start huge tobacco plantations. Soon colonists had established about 40 of these plantations up and down the James River. They turned more and more Powhatan land into tobacco farms.

The settlers were able to do this because a colonist and an Indian had fallen in love. In 1613, the colonists took Pocahontas, one of chief Powhatan's daughters, hostage, hoping to trade her for English prisoners held by the Indians. Her father refused. So Pocahontas, then about 18, remained with the English. John Rolfe began to spend a lot of time with her. In a letter he wrote that she had captured his heart and he could think of no one else. The two married in 1614, and from that time until Pochahontas's death in 1617, the English and Indians were at peace.

To work the plantations established during the "Peace of Pocahontas," landowners needed many, many people. They paid for lots of men and women to come to Virginia from England. In return, these new arrivals had to work for the landowners for seven years as indentured servants. The type of slavery that would later take root in Virginia did not yet exist. In 1619, only about 50 of 1,000 settlers were Africans. Thirty-two African "servants" lived in the colony at the start of the year. Around 20 slaves from southwestern Africa (now Angola) arrived later, by accident. They had been captured from a Portuguese slave ship by Dutch pirates. The pirates stopped at Jamestown and traded the Africans for supplies.

To convince more English to come and stay in the colony, the Virginia Company gave colonists a voice in their government. For many years settlers had lived under strict, military-style rules called martial law. Now the company



relaxed those rules. It allowed colonists who owned land to elect representatives. Each part of the colony sent two representatives to an assembly called the House of Burgesses, which met for the first time in 1619. These representatives passed laws and helped govern Virginia. This was the start of democracy in America.

To keep men in the colony the Virginia Company also tried increasing the number of women. The company thought that married men would be happier—less likely to run off to live with the Indians or go home to England. So in

Women were sent to Jamestown as wives, to cook and clean and wash clothes for settler men. They also planted gardens, reducing the colony's dependence on Indian-grown corn. (Shown below is a 400-year-old bit of cob excavated by archaeologists.)



1619 it launched the “Maids for Virginia” program, which sent 147 women to marry the colony’s gentlemen.

The maids were women of high social rank in their teens and 20s. Investors paid for the maids’ passages, clothing, and supplies. The investors hoped to get back their money and more: Each man wishing to marry a “young, handsome, and honestly educated maid” had to give the company 150 pounds of the best tobacco.

As wives, these women prepared meals, cleaned, sewed, and laundered. For many years the settlement had been run like an army outpost, with filthy housing and bad food. Now it became a colony of families, with children.

By the 1620s, it was clear to the Virginia Indians that Jamestown was no small trading post. Pocahontas’s marriage to John Rolfe had kept the peace, but now she was dead. At the end of a visit to England, just after she boarded a ship to return to Virginia, she became ill from what may have been consumption, or tuberculosis. She died within days. Chief Powhatan himself died a year after his daughter. A new chief named Opechancanough became leader of the Powhatan. He was determined to drive the English out of Virginia.