

# NOTHING TO LOSE



England in the early 1600s was a good place to leave. People were being forced off land they farmed and into poverty. Once, most families had tilled small plots that belonged to wealthy property owners called lords. In return for the right to farm the land, families gave part of their harvests to these lords. But in the early 1600s this way of life, called *feudalism*, was breaking down. Property owners were selling and renting their land. Landlords were driving away families who could not afford to lease or buy fields. Often property owners fenced off large areas, including land that had been shared by all, to make money from businesses like sheep farming.

Just as families were being thrown off farms, the number of people living in England was increasing. So in the countryside, there was not enough land. In the cities, there were not enough jobs. The landless, jobless, and hungry wandered from place to place looking for a way to survive. England's rich feared these "vagrants." In order to stop them from wandering about, the country's rulers

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*Many early Jamestown settlers came from London and from communities along England's south and east coasts long linked to shipbuilding and the sea (opposite). They were drawn by the promise of land and homes to call their own (above).*



*Jamestown's many high-ranking gentlemen displayed their status through the way they dressed, in touches as small as silver buttons (right) or an ornate combination tooth and ear pick that could be worn on a chain (below).*



locked up the poor and homeless. They sent them to orphanages, prisons, and workhouses, where they labored long days for a little food.

Many of the people who settled Jamestown were poor, with few opportunities in England. About half of the earliest settlers were indentured servants—craftsmen and laborers who paid for their ship passage by promising to work for seven years without pay.

Most of the rest of the settlers during Jamestown's early years came from wealthy, high-ranking families that owned land—the gentlemen. In England they had a special status that allowed them to help the king to govern and required lower-ranking people to obey them. To let everyone know how important they were, gentlemen wore fancy clothes. They wore coats with silver-braided threads, collars pressed with scores of ruffles, and gold-plated spurs—even when they weren't riding horses.





They paid their own way across the Atlantic and received food and clothing from their families on later supply ships.

Jamestown's gentlemen went to Virginia to serve God and their country and to get rich. They hoped to convert the Indians to Christianity and to win a part of the New World for England. They also hoped to find new sources of raw materials and an easy way to reach Asia by ship.

Most of the Jamestown gentlemen had two, three, or more older brothers. Because they were not born first or second, they would not inherit their families' money or businesses. In England such young men often agreed to apprentice to artisans, merchants, ship captains, or military officers. But these younger sons had chosen adventure instead.

Gentlemen were among the few settlers who knew how to shoot a musket. In England only people who belonged to the highest-ranking classes could afford firearms. Most hunted regularly with guns. Many of Jamestown's gentlemen were also soldiers with military experience. As the settlement's military force, they built and guarded the fort and protected groups that went exploring.



*Though criticized as lazy, gentlemen were among the only colonists who knew how to use guns (top), since low-ranking people rarely owned firearms in England. Gentlemen defended the colony and hunted for food with round bullets called musket balls (above).*





*English armor could stop stone-tipped Indian arrows but it was hot and heavy to wear. The settlers adapted by cutting armor into small pieces and quilting the metal into arrow-proof vests. They carried gunpowder in cylinders called bandoliers.*

Captain John Smith, one of the few leaders of Jamestown who was not a gentleman, did not think much of these high-ranking settlers. He accused them of refusing to work with the rest of the colonists. He complained that there were too many gentlemen at Jamestown. He wrote to the Virginia Company, pleading, "I [beg] you rather send but 30 carpenters, husbandmen, gardeners, fishermen, blacksmiths, masons, and diggers-up of trees' roots ... than a thousand of such as we have."

Instead the company sent foreign experts—Poles, Dutch, Germans, French, Italians, Welsh, and Irish—to make glass, wine, and silk, and to look for gold and other precious metals. The Virginia Company needed colonists to ship back valuable commodities to England. It also wanted the colonists to trade with the Indians for food. Reports from the failed colony at Roanoke had described how much the Indians valued copper, so the company sent settlers with a lot of it to trade.

The company planned for the Indians to provide not only the food for Jamestown but also much of the labor. In return the Indians would receive Christianity, civilization, and good government. The English thought this would be a fair exchange.

A few of the settlers arriving in every supply ship during Jamestown's early years were boys. In England at that time, children often were sent to live as apprentices or servants and to get an education. In the same way, families sent boys to Jamestown as servants and apprentices so they could learn a trade or find their fortunes.

Because of their ages, these boys were better at learning languages than adult settlers. The colony's leaders used





them to build friendships with the Indians. They gave English boys to chiefs as pledges of good faith. Living among the Indians, the boys became fluent speakers of the Powhatan tongue. They translated for both sides.

One such interpreter was 13-year-old Henry Spelman. Spelman wrote that he left England, "being in displeasure of my friends, and desirous to see other countries," He went to Jamestown as a laborer but was traded to one of chief Powhatan's sons for a piece of land. He arrived among the Indians when the friendship between the English and Powhatan was breaking down. After he watched the Indians skin a captured English officer alive with a razor-sharp clam shell, Spelman ran away. As he fled, he almost had his head bashed in with a stone axe. Shipping off to Virginia was a risky business.

*Shipped to Jamestown to learn trades and serve as pages to gentlemen, boys were often swept into the battles between the English and the Indians. Some, sent to live with the Indians, in time learned the Indian language and helped the two sides understand each other.*