

# STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND



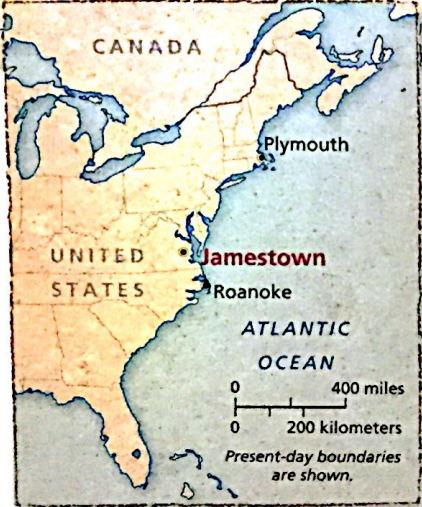
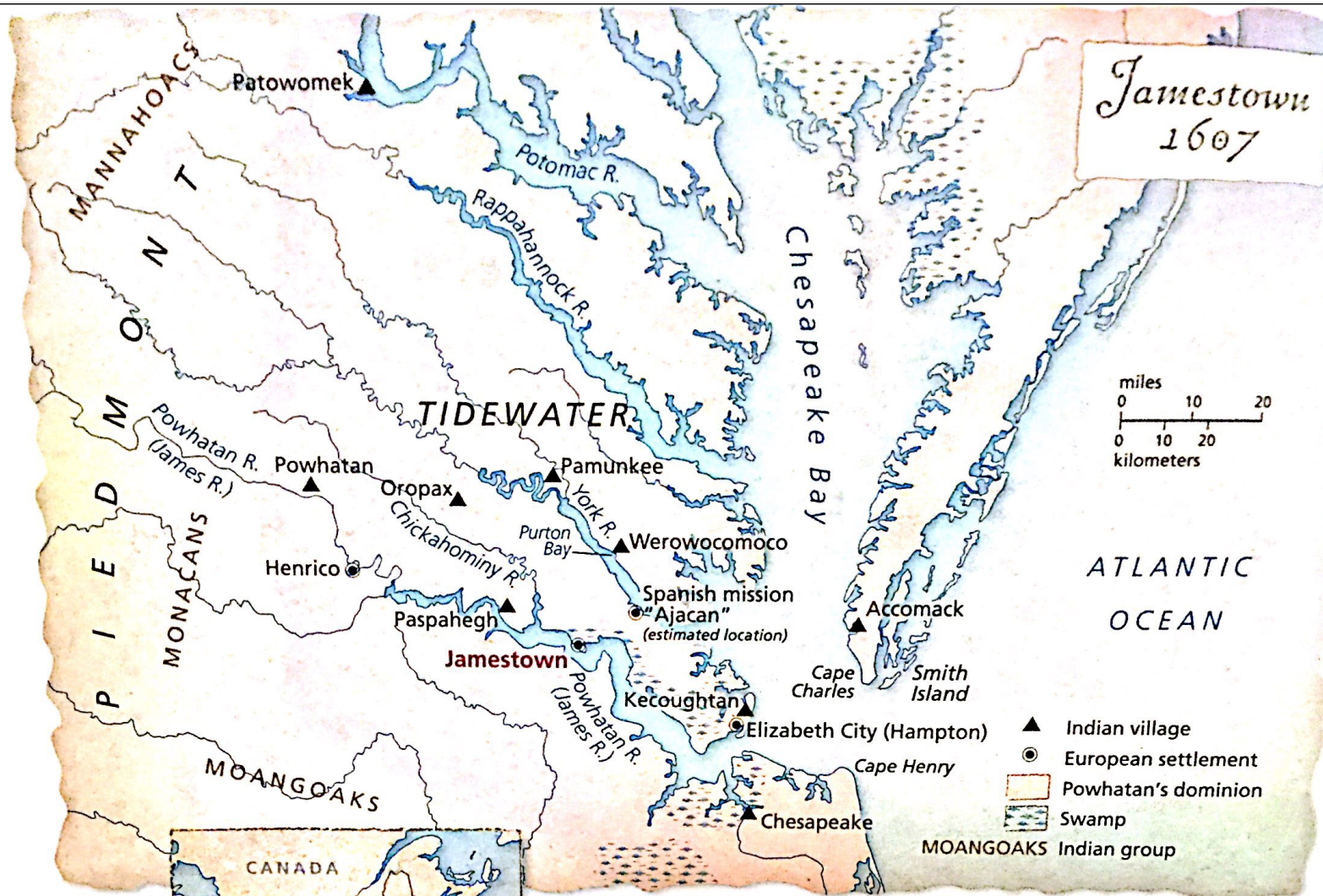
In the spring of 1607, after five months spent crossing the Atlantic Ocean, three small ships carrying 104 settlers from England reached North America. The voyagers landed on the coast of a land they called Virginia. Then they sailed up a river they named James, after their king. They searched for a good spot for a fort. The men and boys aboard the ships were risking their lives in a daring adventure: to found Jamestown, England's first permanent settlement in North America.

For decades, the English had tried but failed to establish colonies in North America. Settlers had died or given up or simply vanished: In 1590, a ship bringing supplies to an English colony on Roanoke Island, off the coast of present-day North Carolina, found the settlement mysteriously abandoned. The Roanoke colonists were never found.

Where the English had failed, the Spanish had succeeded. Spain had many colonies in the Americas and had grown rich and powerful from their gold. Spain had a settlement in Florida and claimed land up the east coast of the

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*The Susan Constant and two smaller ships arrived in Jamestown after stopping in the Caribbean to take on fresh water and food. The colonists came ashore on a swampy peninsula, where the land juts into the James River (above).*



*Jamestown lies in the Tidewater region of Virginia, which is bounded on the east by the Atlantic Ocean and on the west by an imaginary line that connects the first waterfalls along the rivers.*

present-day United States all the way to Virginia. Not far from the James River, a small group of Spaniards had tried to start a town and Catholic mission in 1570. But they were killed by Indians.

The 104 colonists sailing up the James knew that if the king of Spain learned about their settlement, he might send his navy to destroy it and them. So they looked carefully for a place they could defend from Spanish ships. On May 15, the expedition's leaders found the spot they were looking for—a piece of land nearly surrounded by water 36 miles up the James River. They liked the site's position. It was connected to the mainland by only a narrow strip of ground. It lay next to a deep channel that allowed the English to tie their ships to trees on the shore. And it offered a nearby spot where lookouts could be posted to watch for the enemy.

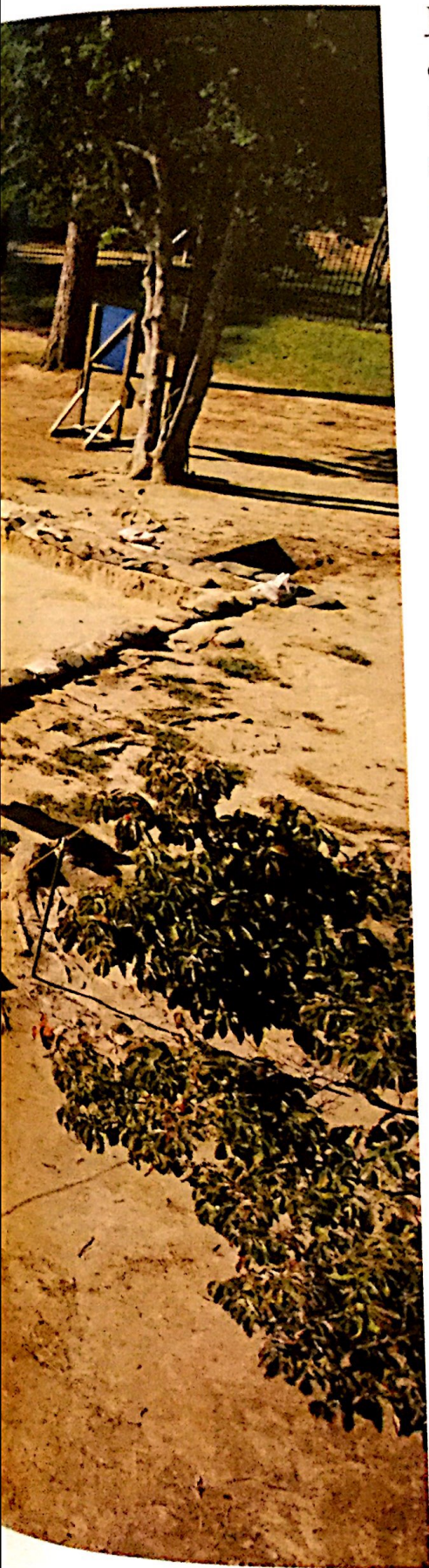


But the site also had problems. It was low and marshy, with little dry land. And it was so close to the ocean that the water in the river tasted of salt. Worst of all, it had no freshwater springs or streams.

The settlers—well-dressed, high-ranking leaders called gentlemen, as well as soldiers, craftsmen, laborers, and four boys who came to learn trades—stepped ashore on a high stretch of ground along the island’s northwest edge. They began lashing branches together to make a crude fort. As they worked in the mild air, perhaps swatting mosquitoes from the surrounding swamp, they did not know how much danger they faced. Under orders to be friendly to the Indians, they did not unpack their guns.

Within a year, two-thirds of the settlers would perish from hunger, disease, and Indian attacks. Within three years, as settlers continued to die in large numbers,

*The English found plentiful timber around Jamestown to build their houses, which had walls made of sticks plastered with mud.*



Jamestown was almost abandoned. The terrible death toll continued for almost 20 years, into the 1620s. By 1624, the business that had started the colony and tried to make a profit from it—the Virginia Company—had run out of money. The English king withdrew his permission for the company to operate the colony. Instead, Jamestown became a colony ruled directly by the king.

For generations, historians have blamed Jamestown's near failure on the foolishness and laziness of its planners, leaders, and ordinary settlers. "[They] appear to have been without a trace of foresight or enterprise," wrote W. E. Woodward in *A New American History*, published in 1937. "Though they were eating up their supply of food, they wandered about, looking over the country, and dreaming of gold mines. To dig a well for pure water would have been a labor of only a few hours, but they did not have the gumption to do that."

Now those views are changing. Archaeologists have located and begun excavating the site of Jamestown's earliest settlement—the 1607 fort. They have also discovered the capital of the ruler of the local Indian tribes, and have dug at smaller sites that reveal how Indians lived before and just after Europeans arrived. Scientists have figured out what Jamestown's climate was like around 1607. And researchers have found new records from the time that help explain events in the colony's early years.

It has taken four centuries, but we now have a better understanding of why so many died during Jamestown's early years. And from this we have a better understanding of the beginnings of the United States. Because, in many ways, the United States got its start at Jamestown.

*Archaeologist Bill Kelso (standing) and a team of excavators found Jamestown's original, triangular fort in the 1990s. They first uncovered the eastern corner, where two walls held cannons.*