

THE DYING TIMES



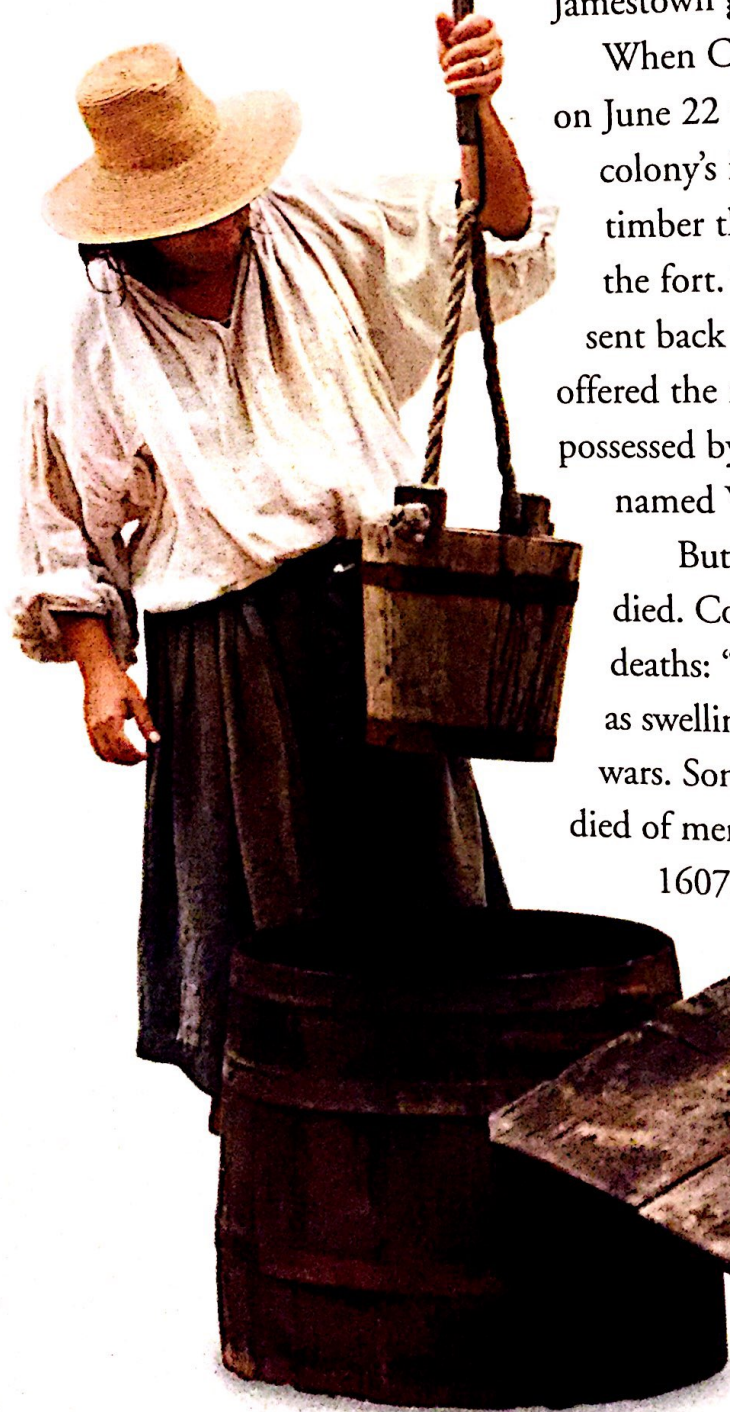
Within days of the settlers' landing in 1607, hundreds of Powhatan warriors attacked. We do not know exactly why, but we can guess. Chief Powhatan did not have absolute control over the tribes within his empire. One or more of the chiefs under Powhatan may have been offended by the English. The strangers had taken Paspahugh land. They had threatened Powhatan visitors with weapons.

While a party of settlers was away exploring up the river, the Indians surprised the remaining colonists. The English had been planting corn. Retreating from a rain of arrows, the settlers fell back in confusion. As the Indians chased the English to the entrance of the fort, sailors aboard the ships fired cannons at the attackers. Had it not been for the cannon fire, wrote Captain John Smith, "our men [would have] all been slain." As it was, one of the English boys was killed and at least eleven English men were wounded.

Immediately, Jamestown's first president, Edward Maria Wingfield, ordered the settlers to surround the fort with 12-foot-high walls made of split or unhewn timber

An early gentlemen settler whose skeleton (opposite) was found in the 1607 fort probably died of a gunshot wound to the leg. Many more colonists, who crowded into the fort (above) to escape Indian attacks, died of hunger and disease.

*Settlers at Jamestown
caught fatal diseases
when they drank from
the salty, polluted river.
Strict rules forbade
colonists from fouling
wells like this one.*



planted in the ground. The men completed these palisades in a month of furious work. They put cannons in the triangular fort's three corners. Warned by friendly Indians, the English cut the grass around the walls. The grass had allowed warriors to creep close to the settlement unseen and shoot arrows at colonists who ventured outside.

On June 15, after a month of raids, Powhatan ordered his warriors to stop. Then the great chief started sending Jamestown gifts of deer meat.

When Captain Christopher Newport left Jamestown on June 22 to sail back to England for more supplies, the colony's future seemed good. His ship held a cargo of timber that the settlers had cut in the woods around the fort. The Indians were suddenly friendly. Settlers sent back glowing reports. "Now is the King's Majesty offered the most stately, rich kingdom in the world, never possessed by any Christian prince," wrote a gentleman named William Brewster.

But a few weeks later, Brewster and many others died. Colonist George Percy recorded the first of the deaths: "Our men were destroyed with cruel diseases—as swellings [bloody diarrhea], burning fevers—and by wars. Some departed suddenly, but for the most part they died of mere famine." There were 104 colonists in May 1607. By January 1608 only 38 remained alive.

John Smith and other eyewitnesses blamed the deaths on foolish, quarrelsome leaders and settlers who didn't know how to farm or fish and didn't want to try. Jamestown's leaders frequently argued and plotted against each other. Even before



By studying the remains of early settlers (above) archaeologists hope to figure out why so many died. Below:

A U-shaped musket rest that fit on a pole to help a hunter aim his gun; a bandolier cylinder, or container for gunpowder; and a hook and lead weights for fishing testify to the colonists' struggle to feed themselves.

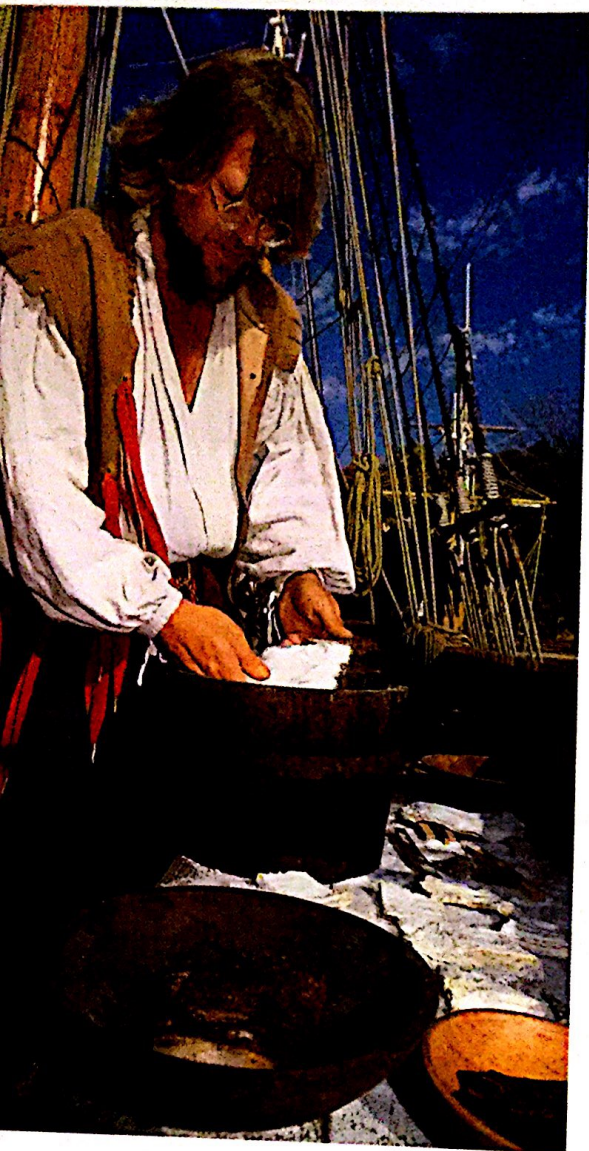


they got off their ships, Smith was placed under arrest for insulting President Wingfield. Once ashore, Jamestown's leaders mistrusted each other. They shot Captain George Kendall as a Spanish spy. For their part, Jamestown's ordinary colonists appeared to slack off after the first months of hard work building a fort.

But even if Jamestown had had the best leaders and settlers, it would have been difficult for them to survive. Percy identified the problem early on: The colonists were drinking from a salty, polluted river. "Our drink [was] cold water taken out of the river, which was at a flood very salt, at a low tide full of slime and filth," he wrote.

The settlers arrived at Jamestown just before summer, the season when the river is the saltiest and most polluted. Some settlers who drank the river water suffered from salt poisoning. They became tired and irritable and their bodies swelled up. Others fell sick because of bacteria in the water. They came down with dysentery—a severe and often bloody diarrhea—and typhoid fever.

The first of several wells was dug in 1608, under Smith's order. Later, to protect these wells and people's general health, Jamestown's leaders forbade settlers from going to the bathroom or dumping the waste they collected in chamber pots



Sailors stored fish on board ship by salting it. Colonists were more successful at fishing and collecting shellfish such as oysters than at hunting deer, for which they relied on Indian expertise.

within the fort. Colonists had to walk at least a quarter mile away (sometimes dodging arrows). But either the wells were too shallow to reach good water or the river seeped in. Perhaps the settlers ignored the rules. Colonists continued to get sick and die as long as they remained at Jamestown.

If the colonists had picked the wrong place to settle, they had also picked the wrong time. Drought struck from 1607 through 1612, withering crops like corn.

Irregular supply ships brought rations of barley, barreled meat, butter, peas, and other food for the colonists. The settlers also caught fish such as sturgeon, shot ducks and other fowl, and gathered oysters. But much of their food came through trade with the Indians. John Smith wrote that he once traded 25 pounds of copper, 50 pounds of iron, and blue glass beads for enough bread, corn, meat, fowl, and fish to feed 40 men for six months. The drought upset this trade.

Even during times of normal rainfall, the Powhatan did not have much extra corn to trade to the English. They raised only enough to feed themselves and pay tribute to chief Powhatan. When rains failed, the Indians themselves went hungry. The Powhatan could not keep providing food to the English. Desperate, the English threatened to seize food if the Indians would not give it to them.

To make matters worse, the Indians no longer wanted the copper the settlers were offering. That's probably because the English, especially sailors docked at Jamestown, had flooded the market with copper. They gave the Indians so much that the metal became common and lost its value.

Beset by English demands for their food and no longer wishing to trade with the settlers, the Powhatan tried to drive their new neighbors away. They sent English men living with them back to Jamestown and surrounded the fort with warriors. Inside, the settlers drank bad water, fell sick, and went hungry. With no other food, they ate dogs, cats, horses, rats, and even poisonous snakes.



“Many through extreme hunger [ran] out of their naked beds, being so lean they looked like [skeletons], crying out ‘We are starved! We are starved!’” wrote George Percy. “Others going to bed, as we imagined, in health, were found dead the next morning.”

Malnourished, weak from disease, isolated, and hopeless, some of the settlers gave up on life. Though they were not starving or seriously ill, they lay down and died.

Altogether during the “starving time” winter and spring of 1609 to 1610, about 100 of an estimated 200 colonists perished. Jamestown’s settlers had remained through three years of disease, hunger, and death. But the intense suffering of the “starving time” left the survivors ready to quit and go home. They boarded the first ship to reach Jamestown and were sailing away when they met another ship. It was carrying the colony’s new governor and supplies. The settlers turned back to try again.

Archaeologists uncovered an early cemetery that provides evidence of Jamestown’s high death rate. During the worst times, when scores perished quickly, settlers buried them in haphazardly dug holes, sometimes dropping more than one body in a grave.