

for the state to supervise, regulate, and protect industry and commerce. Their primary objective was to enrich the nation by fostering a favorable balance of trade. Once the value of exports exceeded the cost of imports, they theorized, gold and silver would flow into home ports. If a nation could dispense entirely with imports from other countries, so much the better—and it was here that the idea of colonies entered the mercantilist scheme. Colonial planters and farmers, miners and loggers would supply raw materials that the mother country could not produce, while colonial consumers swelled demand for the finished goods and financial services that the mother country could provide. Convinced that colonies would enhance national self-sufficiency, mercantilists urged states to sponsor overseas settlements.

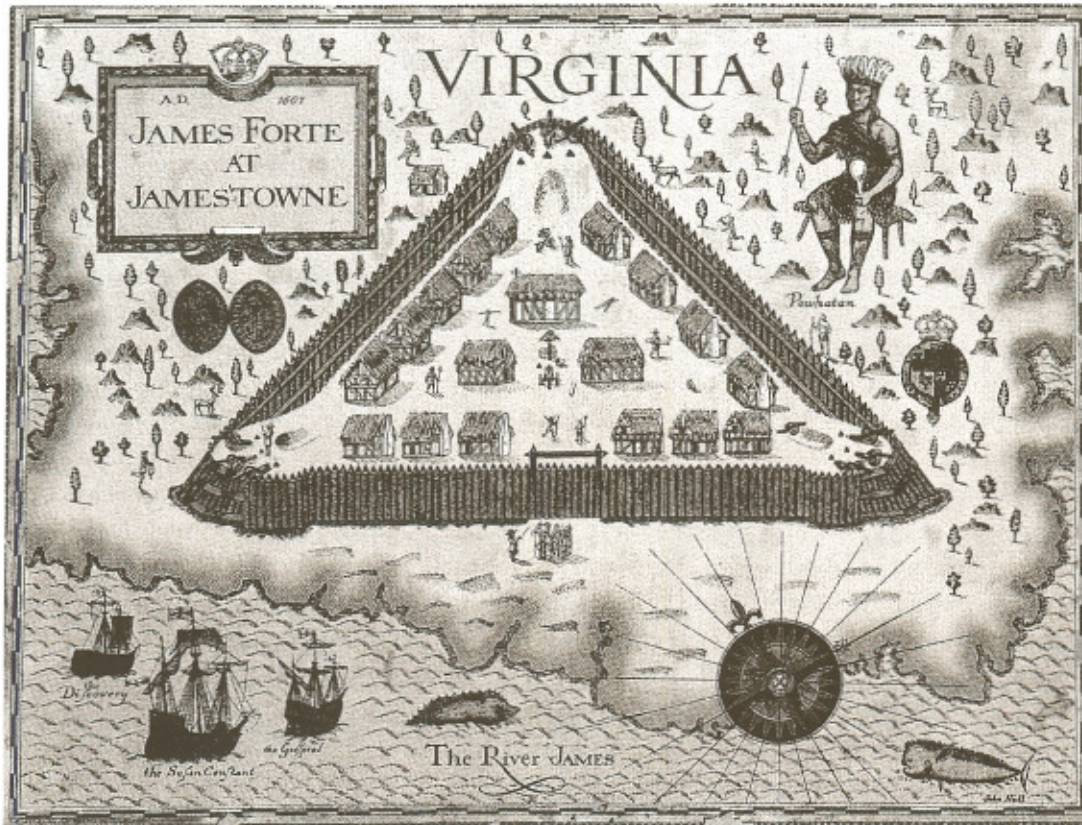
Mercantilist notions appealed to Europe's ambitious monarchs. A thriving trade meant that larger revenues from taxes and customs duties would fill royal coffers, increasing royal power. That logic led James I to lend his approval to the private venture that brought the first white settlers to the Chesapeake.

The Virginia Company

In 1606 the king granted a charter to Richard Hakluyt and a number of English merchants, gentlemen, and aristocrats, incorporating them as the Virginia Company of London. The members of the new joint stock company promptly sold stock in their venture to English investors, as well as awarding a share to those willing to settle in Virginia at their own expense. With the proceeds from the sale of stock, the company planned to send to Virginia hundreds of poor and unemployed people as well as scores of skilled craftsmen. These laborers were to serve the company for seven years in return for their passage, pooling their efforts to produce any commodities that would return a profit to stockholders. Like Gilbert and Raleigh before them, the investors hoped to make money by discovering gold in the New World, as the Spanish had in the sixteenth century. If that failed, they hoped that North America might yield other valuable commodities—furs, pitch, tar, lumber, or sassafras, which Spanish merchants were hawking throughout Europe as a cure for a less popular American import, syphilis. In the spring of 1607, the Virginia Company's first expedition—104 men and boys aboard the *Godspeed*, the *Discovery*, and the *Susan Constant*—sailed into the Chesapeake Bay and up the Powhatan River, renaming it the James. Some 30 miles upstream, they founded Jamestown.

That was the first of many mistakes. Jamestown's first settlers had pitched their fort on an inland site ideally suited to prevent a surprise attack from the Spanish. Unfortunately, the marshy, thickly forested peninsula was also ideally conducive to malaria, especially during the steamy summer settling over the Chesapeake. Even for healthy men willing to work hard, cultivating such land would have been a daunting task. But Jamestown's settlers, weakened by bouts of malaria and then beset by dysentery, typhoid, and yellow fever, died by the scores, and those who survived were left listless and debilitated.

Many of Jamestown's first settlers—gentlemen who expected to lead rather than to work—had little taste for labor even before ill health claimed whatever inclination to work they might have had. Most other members of the early colonizing parties were gentlemen's servants and craftsmen—goldsmiths, jewelers, refiners, even a perfumer—men who were accustomed to labor but who did not regard it as their line of work. The settlers resorted to bullying and begging



In Jamestown's early years its military orientation was clear. The fort's heavy palisades and its strategic location upriver and some distance inland underscore the colonists' concern for defense—as does the imposing figure of Powhatan seated at the right.

food from Powhatan's people, but the Indians' liberality was less than reliable, especially after the departure of John Smith. Food shortages produced chronic malnutrition, which heightened the colonists' susceptibility to disease, and even more drastic consequences. Only 60 of Jamestown's 500 inhabitants lived through the winter of 1609–1610, known as the "starving time." Some desperate colonists unearthed and ate corpses; one settler even butchered his wife.

Reports of starvation and staggering death rates stiffened the Virginia Company's resolve: in 1611 it imposed on the colonists what amounted to martial law. Company officials in Virginia organized the settlers into work gangs and inflicted draconian punishments on the lazy and the disorderly. Still the company failed to turn a profit. And after 1617, skirmishes with the Indians became more brutal and frequent, as rows of tobacco plants encroached on tribal lands farther and farther inland. The "noxious weeds" were equally an embarrassment to advocates of colonization at home in England. After a decade of settlement, Virginia's sole contribution to the empire was the smoke filling England's taverns and brothels. Even James I, whose standards of hygiene and morality often caused his own courtiers to wince, condemned the use of tobacco as a filthy and dissipated habit.

Reform and a Boom in Tobacco

Desperate to salvage their investment and their respectability, the company managers instituted in 1618 the sweeping reform program advocated by a principal stockholder, Sir Edwin Sandys. To attract more capital and colonists to Virginia,

the company established a "headright" system for granting land to individuals. Those already settled in the colony received 100 acres apiece, new settlers each received 50 acres, and anyone who paid the passage of other immigrants to Virginia—either family members or servants—received 50 acres per "head." The company also dispensed with martial law, allowing the planters to elect a representative assembly, which, along with a governor and an advisory council appointed by the company, had the authority to make laws for the colony. The House of Burgesses met for the first time in 1619, commencing what would become a strong tradition of representative government in the English colonies. Finally, the company attempted to encourage a more diverse economy by ordering that no colonist could grow more than 100 pounds of tobacco annually and by dispatching to Virginia an assortment of skilled workers—vintners, ironworkers, brickmakers, and glassblowers.

The new measures to encourage migration met with immediate success. For several years both free immigrants and bound laborers surged into Virginia. Of the bound laborers, some were indentured servants who agreed to work a set number of years, usually four to seven, for the planters paying the cost of their passage. Others were sharecropping tenants who were to cultivate company land under the direction of its agents in the colony; for seven years they were to turn half of their earnings over to the Virginia Company, and at the end of their terms of service, they were to receive 50 acres.

Free immigrants poured into Virginia, too, for during the 1620s the tobacco economy took off. As demand soared and prices peaked in European markets, those with an eye for profits took their chances in Virginia, planted every inch of their farms in tobacco, and reaped windfalls. Because of the gains that free settlers stood to make by growing tobacco, the effort to diversify Virginia's economy failed. That was just one casualty of the tobacco boom; another was the lives of most English men and women who came to Virginia during the 1620s.

Those who crossed the Atlantic to Virginia during that decade were in the vanguard of an English migration to the Chesapeake that numbered between 130,000 and 150,000 over the seventeenth century. Drawn from the ranks of ordinary English working people, the immigrants were predominantly men, outnumbering women by six to one; typically young, ranging in age between 15 and 24; and generally, because of their youth, without skills or wealth. Three-quarters of all the newcomers arrived in the Chesapeake as indentured servants.

For most of the new servants, the crossing to Virginia was simply the last of many moves, each undertaken in the hope of finding work. While England's population had been expanding since the middle of the fifteenth century, changes in agriculture, chiefly the conversion of arable land for crops to pasturage for sheep, had steadily reduced the need for farm laborers. A severe recession in the English textile industry early in the seventeenth century augmented the problem of employing a growing number of people. The search for work pushed young men and women out of their villages, sending them through the countryside and then into the cities. Down and out in London, Bristol, or Liverpool, some decided to make their next move across the Atlantic and signed indentures. Pamphlets promoting immigration promised a bounteous natural environment, a balmy climate, and, once servants finished their terms, abundant land and quick riches. If the recruits to the Chesapeake did not credit completely these rosy promises, the lack of work, the low wages, and the high prices in old England made them desperate enough to try their luck in the New World anyway.

Even the most skeptical immigrants must have been shocked at what they found. The death rate in Virginia during the 1620s was higher than that of England during times of epidemic disease. The life expectancy for Chesapeake men who reached the age of 20 was a mere 48 years; for women it was lower still. Servants fared worst of all, since malnutrition, overwork, and abuse made them vulnerable to disease. And as masters scrambled to make quick profits, they extracted the maximum amount of work before death carried off their laborers. An estimated 40 percent of servants never regained their freedom because they did not survive to the end of their indentured terms.

The expanding cultivation of tobacco also claimed many lives by putting unbearable pressure on Indian land. Following Powhatan's death in 1617, leadership of the confederacy passed to Opechancanough, who watched, year after year, the tobacco mania grow. In March 1622 he coordinated a full-scale attack on white settlements that killed about one-fifth of the white population of Virginia. Swift English reprisals wiped out whole tribes and cut down an entire generation of young Indian men. As tragic as the casualties on both sides was the view of Indians that the events of 1622 fixed in the minds of the English—the belief that all Indians were treacherous and cunning, incapable of being civilized and incorporated into English colonial society. Back in England, John Smith predicted the consequence: the Virginians now saw “just cause to destroy them [the Indians] by all meanes possible.”

The aftermath of the Indian war revealed to English investors the true state of their Virginia venture. It came to light that unscrupulous company officials in the

colony had commandeered tenants to work their private plantations instead of company lands. The Virginia Company, despite the tobacco boom, was plunging toward bankruptcy. Nor was that the worst news. Stockholders discovered that their colony numbered just 1240 inhabitants after the upheaval in 1622. More than 3500 people had immigrated to Virginia after 1619, joining several hundred settlers who had arrived earlier. The Indian war had claimed 345 colonists. What accounted for the deaths of so many others? An investigation by the king brought out the whole truth: shiploads of servants and tenants, more dead than alive from scurvy, had been disgorged on Virginia shores without adequate supplies of food and clothing. Labor-hungry planters had snatched up the survivors, buying and selling their contracts like any other commodity, starving and driving human beings out of sheer greed. As one servant observed, Virginia masters used English men, women, and children "like damned slaves." James I dissolved the Virginia Company and took control of the colony himself in 1624.

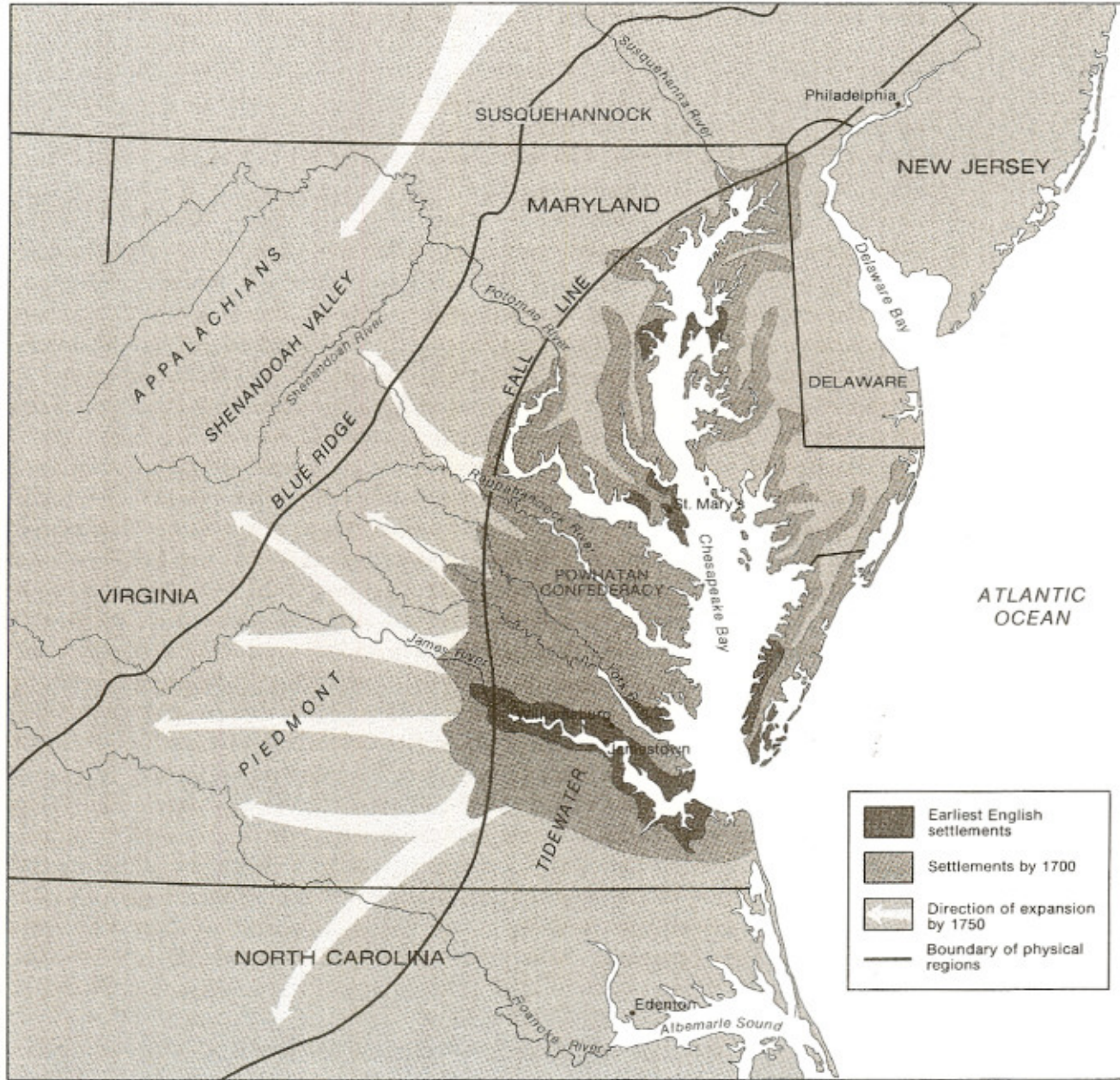
Settling Down in the Chesapeake

The 1630s and 1640s brought beleaguered colonists some respite from the chaos of the first decades of Virginia's settlement. Although servants still streamed into the colony, the price of tobacco leveled off, which meant that planters were less likely to drive their servants to death in search of overnight fortunes. As the fever of the tobacco boom broke, a more settled social and political life emerged in Virginia. The same shrewd, ruthless tobacco planters who had become wealthy by monopolizing land now began to consolidate their gains through political power. They established local bases of influence in Virginia's counties, serving as justices of the peace and sheriffs, maintaining roads and bridges, collecting taxes, and supervising local elections. There they organized all able-bodied adult males into militias for local defense. There they established and served in vestries, the governing bodies of local Anglican parishes, hiring the handful of clergy who came to Virginia and providing for the neighborhood poor.

The biggest tobacco planters of each county also dominated colony politics. Even though King James had replaced the Virginia Company's government by charter with his own royal administration, the colony's elected assembly continued making laws for the colony. Along with the council (the upper house of the legislature), the assembly stoutly resisted interference in Virginia's affairs from the royal governor, the king's representative.

While the structure of colony and local government took shape, Virginia's population grew. As tobacco became less lucrative, planters raised more corn and cattle, and mortality rates declined as food supplies rose. The growing number of men who survived servitude found greater opportunity in the Chesapeake during the 1630s and 1640s than would have been theirs in England. The majority of freed servants, after a few years of working as hired hands or tenant farmers, managed to save enough money to buy their own land and become independent planters. That status was attained by few farmers in England, most of whom remained the tenants of gentlemen and aristocrats.

For the women who survived servitude in the Chesapeake, prospects were even better. With wives at a premium, single women stood a good chance of improving their status by marriage—far better than women back in England. Some impatient planters even bought women servants out of their indentures. If they outlived their husbands, widows inherited handsomely and often contracted even more advantageous second—and third—marriages.



COLONIES OF THE CHESAPEAKE

Settlements in Virginia and Maryland spread out along the many bays of the Chesapeake, where tobacco could easily be loaded from plantation wharves. The "fall line" on rivers, dividing Tidewater and Piedmont regions, determined the extent of commercial agriculture, since ships could not pick up exports beyond that point.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, Virginia numbered about 15,000, with more servants and free immigrants coming to the colony every year. The increase of inhabitants and the rapid depletion of the soil by tobacco fed an eagerness for fresh land. But two impediments stood between the Virginians and the new territory that they coveted. The first problem was the creation of a second colony in the Chesapeake.