As the first permanent English colony in what would become the United States of America, Jamestown necessarily faced a multitude of setbacks that produced an image of a failed attempt at colonization, an image which has been accepted by many historians as a true representation of this colony. It is commonly assumed that only “by the heroic Captain John Smith”\(^1\) was the colony eventually saved, as expressed by L.H. Roper, a theory that erases the individual actions of the settlers themselves. In response to this, Karen Kupperman declares in her book *The Jamestown Project*, “Jamestown makes us uncomfortable,” referring to the ambiguous ideologies surrounding this early settlement as to the extent of its success.\(^2\) Historians have attempted to find the source of the “failure” in Jamestown, yet many overlook the significance of its persistence. When considering the number of complications it faced, Jamestown should be praised as vital to the history of America, not in spite of its faults, but because of them. The social and political conditions of this early expedition set an inherently flawed model for Jamestown before the ships even left the ports of England. The fact that this colony was able survive its first years in light of the various factors working against it suggests not only the adaptability and resolution of the settlers, but also the significance of Jamestown’s place as the first permanent American colony. Due to the number of external factors

influencing this expedition, it can be argued that Jamestown was ultimately a successful colony that set a precedent for all future English colonization in America.

The study of Jamestown has produced a diverse collection of historiographical works that attempt to either praise or condemn this early colony. Frank E. Grizzard Jr. and D. Boyd Smith focus on the failures of the settlers, claiming “this was an inverted society, wrongly selected for tasks that did not exist.”\(^3\) Idleness is one of the most commonly accepted causes for the struggles of Jamestown during its first years as a settlement. Grizzard Jr. and Smith address the issue of idleness among settlers, making the claim that they “did not adjust, did not work, became dependent and passive, lay down in large numbers, and died.”\(^4\) Edmund S. Morgan also draws attention to this standard assumption in his article “The Labour Problem at Jamestown,” however he notes that “idleness is more of an accusation than an explanation.”\(^5\) It would be convenient to accuse the settlers of laziness, however this explanation is too simple and does little to examine the various external factors surrounding this expedition. Tony Williams explains some of these external factors in his book *The Jamestown Experiment* by considering the early months of this colony as “simply a struggle to survive and endure,” and mentioning the spread of diseases, the falsity of English promotional letters regarding the bountiful nature of the land, as well as tense relationships with the Native Americans.\(^6\) Williams refines this failure to focus on the economic aspect of the colony, arguing that “the

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\(^3\) Frank E. Grizzard, Jr. and D. Boyd Smith, *Jamestown Colony: A Political, Social, and Cultural History* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2007), xxviii.

\(^4\) Ibid, xxviii.

\(^5\) Morgan, 596.

Crown did not offer any direct financial support” and that “the settlers were largely on their own.”

With Williams’ economic argument in consideration, the instinct to blame the individual settlers for the failures of the colony becomes less realistic. Williams goes on to praise the early settlers for their “entrepreneurial spirit that would shape and define the American character,” as the construction and perseverance of the colony was dependent on the traits of the settlers, including “private property, individual initiative, personal incentives to seek profit, and the freedom to pursue one’s own happiness.” By shifting the perspective of Jamestown from negative to positive, Williams opens up the opportunity to study Jamestown as a successful colony that was able to overcome the trials of early American life and therefore eliminate the biased view of Jamestown as a complete failure. Karen Kupperman, another historian choosing to regard Jamestown in an optimistic light, argues that this colony was “an enormous accomplishment achieved in a very short period of time,” and addresses the general favour given to New England by stressing the fact that the Pilgrims were able to follow the model set for them by Jamestown’s successes and failures. Essentially, as Kupperman states, “all other successful English colonies followed the Jamestown model,” therefore it cannot be classified as a complete failure as it created “the archetype of English colonization.”

The social organization of Jamestown created several problems for the colony before the settlers even landed on American shores. Since the exact intentions for this colony were ambiguous—whether it was to be a hunt for gold, a military expedition, or a
search for a passage to the Pacific—the selection of men for the journey was ill-fitted for colonial life. As Morgan states in his article, “The Virginia Company was loaded with noblemen,” as opposed to men of practical trades such as farming. The effects of this lack of skilled tradesmen can be seen in various primary accounts, including “Description of the River and Country,” presumably written by Gabriel Archer, which explains that these first settlers, in order to begin farming, “threw the seeds at random, carelessly” and also requested a “skillful man” to properly farm the produce. James Horn argues that the majority of settlers “would have come from London and surrounding regions,” so “they would have been struck by the absence of the familiar,” as “the colony lacked the complexity and density of English society” and “the social gradations and centuries-old traditions and customs that regulated everyday life.” The severe contrast between the social conditions these men experienced in England and in the colony would have influenced their motivations as well as their ability to actually perform the work required to successfully run a colony. The lack of skilled labourers contributed to the “unequivocal misery of disease, want, and fear” that occurred during the first two years of the colony, as Ed Southern describes in *The Jamestown Adventures: Accounts of the Virginia Colony, 1605-1614*. The social structure of the colony also coincides with the social expectations placed on the men of Jamestown. By the time England began to experiment with

11 Morgan, 607.
13 Ibid, 10.
colonization in the New World, stories and legends of Spanish success in the Americas had been circulating throughout Europe for some time. Due to the spirit of competition, as well as a variety of assumptions regarding the New World, as Kupperman explains, “the migrants had been sent over with notoriously unrealizable goals: to find a good source of wealth, preferably precious metals.”\textsuperscript{16} The riches of the Spanish conquests mythicized the entire New World, creating the false assumption that the land the English were colonizing would be “a land of abundance.”\textsuperscript{17} This expectation would have significantly influenced the mindset of the settlers as well as the preparations for this expedition. George Percy, an English explorer present during the earliest years of Jamestown, often blamed the Starving Time—the period of extreme hunger during the winter of 1609-1610—on the colony’s lack of supplies.\textsuperscript{18} Although much of this can be attributed to insufficient preparation for the winter, the expectations regarding the richness of the land in America could have led to insufficient preparation for the trip as a whole, before the settlers even set sail. Regardless of the extent to which expectations played a role in the physical deconstruction of the colony, the social and mental implications of the mythicization of the New World cannot be ignored.

An extension of the social issues disrupting life in Jamestown during its earliest years can be examined through the irrational political structure set in place by English royalty. Due to the reliance on experimentation present during this period of colonization, those organizing the colonies needed to attempt new modes of government that they believed would be effective in a colonial state. In an essay written about the history of Virginia, William Stith presents a list of the orders and authorities granted by King James

\textsuperscript{16} Kupperman, 9.
\textsuperscript{17} Morgan, 600.
\textsuperscript{18} Southern, 35.
I regarding the colony. In the document, Stith analyses the political and judicial structure that was to be followed in Jamestown. According to this framework, Stith argues that King James I had “placed the whole legislative power solely on [the presidents and councils] without any representative of the people,” which, as he reasons, is an “extravagant and illegal power” that is “contrary to a noted maxim of the constitution: that all freeman are to be governed by laws, made with their own consent, either in person, or by their representatives.” As English citizens, the colonists would have expected to be governed according to the English constitution, so any discrepancy in governmental structure would have caused immediate feelings of isolation and alienation from the British administration.

Although it is true that the colonization of Jamestown was an act that required much experimentation and improvisation on the part of both the settlers and the government, there is little evidence to support the benefits of this particular structure outside of the personal gain of the governors except the suppression of potential riots. The imbalance of power present within Jamestown would have significantly influenced the lives of the settlers on an individual and social level. As Tony Williams argues, “the authoritarian model of absolute leadership and the communitarian methods of living were fundamentally at odds with each other.” The settlers’ lack of political voice combined with the rural community-based lifestyle would have been quite the shock for a group of gentlemen accustomed to the upper-class aristocratic lifestyle they left behind in England. The stark contrast between the cultures of England and the New World would have alienated the settlers from the colony and from each other. When combined with the

20 Williams, xi.
foreign experience of marginalization felt due to the imbalance of power within the
government, this alienation could have been a significant factor contributing to the early
years of failure within the colony. Alienation would have deprived the settlers of
incentive and contributed heavily to the social unrest of this dark period. The settlers’
ability to overcome the extreme political and judicial disadvantage they faced, as well as
the shift in cultural climate, suggests the significance of this colony as a model of
perseverance that the other colonies were able to follow. The errors of this political
system allowed future colonies to establish more effective models, enabling a shorter
adjustment period to life in the New World and less social disorder within the
communities of early America.

While these many problems may suggest the failure of the colony, there is a
greater amount of implicit confirmations of the significance of this colony as a vast
success for America. It can be tempting to examine first-hand accounts of the misery of
Jamestown as solid evidence for the failures of the colony, however problems arise with
shallow analyses of these documents. An initial issue found in much of the evidence
surrounding the errors of Jamestown is the nature of the accounts that have survived. As
Kupperman points out, most surviving records “were produced by leaders on both sides
of the Atlantic” and consisted primarily of “complaints, special pleading, and excuses.”21
While these accounts are viewed by historians such as Grizzard Jr. and Smith as evidence
of failure, it is important to understand both the experimentation and individuality of this
expedition. As Kupperman discusses, the “promoters laid plans, but the ordinary people
who carried them out… were the ones who had to deal with realities on the ground and

21 Kupperman, 9.
who ultimately founded a successful colony.”22 The various external factors working against the settlers prompted the need for improvisation.

Although this use of trial and error typically resulted in error, the colonists’ later success is increasingly impressive when examining the sheer mass of factors working against them. Through its many failures, Jamestown established what Kupperman describes as “the successful archetype,” which is essentially the effective model of colonization.23 With this model in place, other colonies could follow an example framed by the successes of Jamestown and secured against its failures by means of experience, a privilege which Jamestown did not receive, as it was the first successful English colony in the New World. When analyzing the value of this colony as an archetype of colonization, it can be argued that the study of Jamestown should be framed in light of its successes rather than in spite of its faults.

The discourse surrounding Jamestown continues to be controversial in attempting to determine the extent to which this colony was successful. An examination of the various external factors influencing this success determine the significance of this colony to the history of America. Further, the perseverance of the settlers in the face of extreme social and political disorder presents an altered image of Jamestown, not as a colony that should be accepted in spite of its flaws, but a group of individuals who should be praised for overcoming them. The unfamiliar social situations and unrealistic English expectations, combined with a severe imbalance of political and judicial power, all worked to prevent the creation of this colony. Rather than disintegrate as the previous

22 Ibid, 11.
23 Ibid, 11.
English attempts at settlement had, Jamestown was able to endure these harsh conditions and develop a reliable model for future colonization in the New World.
Bibliography


