

The Lost Colony at Roanoke

The first effort made by the English to establish a colony in America, occurred in the late sixteenth century, at Roanoke Island. Starting in 1584 efforts were made to explore the east coast of North America as far south as Spanish claims. It was in 1587 that a permanent colony was finally created. However great this accomplish was for the colonists and England, it proved to be one of the greatest American mysteries when the colony was discovered abandoned in 1590.

In this presentation of the lost Roanoke Colony, I plan to describe how the colony was settled, those persons involved in the settlement and the discovery of it's abandonment. Roanoke Island is an island just off the coast of present day North Carolina. The Albemarle Sound, Croatan Sound, Roanoke Sound, and the Pamlico Sound are four bodies of water that surround the island. The Atlantic Ocean is less than ten miles away from Roanoke on it's eastern coast, but direct contact with the ocean is impeded by a strip of land called Bodie Island, which is part of the Outer Banks. The western coast of the Island is also less than ten miles from the mainland of North Carolina.

The history of the settlement can be found in England's increasing interest in laying claim to a portion of the New World during the late 1570's. This interest was even more apparent, when in the same decade, Queen Elizabeth encouraged exploration and settlement of new lands by issuing charters for this task, and it was during this time period when Roanoke Island was discovered by the English. However it was not until March 25, 1584 when the significant history of Roanoke was made with the re-issuing of the charter to Sir Walter Raleigh.

It was the responsibility of Raleigh to make the necessary provisions to complete the journeys to the New World and accomplish the goals of the charter. This meant hiring ship captains and their crews, recruiting possible colonists, purchasing food and other supplies, and finding those who would invest capital in the missions. Raleigh however does not actively participate in the journeys to Roanoke Island; he was just the organizer and major financier. There are a total of four expeditions, under the Raleigh charter, which comprise the story of the lost colony. The first and second expeditions take place from 1584 to 1586. The accomplishments of these missions include producing contact and establishing friendly relations with a native tribe called the Croatoan, the fortification of the island, and searching for an appropriate place for a permanent settlement. It is during the second expedition that there was an attempt to leave a small force of men behind, while the ships returned to England for supplies. They left a few more than one hundred men, which were need to finish fortifying the island, to continue the search for a permanent settlement sight, and to keep an English hold on the island. The effort failed due to the lack of supplies, weather conditions, and the strained relations with the Croatoans and other more violent native tribes. The situation becomes extremely desperate for the men when they resort to their dogs as a source of

food. Luckily for the colonists, a ship came to their rescue and takes all but fifteen men back to England.

The mystery of Roanoke begins with the third expedition of 1587. John White was named governor of the colonist, which mission was believed to be insured by the involvement of entire families. To further insure success, the colonist themselves were the investors. The third expedition of almost one hundred twenty people (men, women and children) ready for colonization, arrived on the island in the spring of 1587.

Their intent was to locate the fifteen men who were left behind in the second expedition, and then find an new settlement sight. It was discovered that the fortifications built by the colonists the year before had been abandoned and there were no clues as to the fate of the fifteen men.

The next step was to find a new sight for settlement. It had been decided in England by Raleigh and John White, that the new settlement should be located in the Chesapeake Bay area to the north on the mainland. The colonist were denied the agreement that Raleigh and White had suggested. This was due to the strained relations between White and the ship captain. Therefore the colonists were forced to settle in the area of the abandoned fortifications for the time being. While the colonists were assembling their homes, contact with the Croatoans was reestablished. In their communications the fate of the fifteen men left behind in the previous expedition was revealed. The Croatoans explain how an enemy tribe attacked the fort and killed some of the men, but how many was not known.

John White, upset with the news of the dead men and the recent discovery of a dead colonist, decides to launch an attack against the enemy, the Powhatans. Instead of attacking the enemy John White's men attack their friends, the Croatoans.

With this violation of trust, the relations between the Croatoans and the colonists had deteriorated. Thus the Croatoans refuse to supply the colonists with food, and the supplies brought with them had begun to spoil. With the shortage of supplies and winter soon approaching, it was decided by the colonists that someone must return to England with the ships in order to relieve them of their supply shortage. John White was sent for the supplies in the late summer of 1587. He leaves approximately one hundred sixteen men, women, and children on Roanoke Island.

John White does not return with the requested supplies until 1590. This three year delay was caused by a war between England and Spain. When he arrives he finds the colony abandoned. There is only a small clue as to where the colonist could be. This clue was the word Croatoan, carved into a tree. This word indicated to White that the colonists moved near or with the Croatoans, but White cannot determine whether his assumption was correct. Before White could make any more progress the captain and his crew, having no interest in the colonists fate wanted to return to England. This fourth expedition then returns to England not knowing the fate of the Roanoke Colonists.

In late 1590 White tries to convince investors and Sir Walter Raleigh to send yet another expedition. Due to the lack of interest in Roanoke by investors and Raleigh, White was unsuccessful in his attempt. It is not until the Jamestown settlement twenty years later, that a firm effort was made to find the true fate of the 1587 colonists of Roanoke Island.

Due to the fact that an investigation was not launched until twenty years later, no one knows what became of the colonists. Therefore there are several theories that attempt to explain their disappearance.

John Smith was the first to gather information about the outcomes of the Roanoke settlement. He questioned the local natives about Roanoke. From this line of questioning he came up with three similar stories. One story was the attack of the settlement and the massacre of all the colonists. In another story the settlement was attacked and the women and children were assimilated only. The final story was that the entire colony was peacefully assimilated into the local native tribes.

No new information or theories are concluded until many years later. These theories include the possibilities of an attack by the Spanish, disease, starvation, and an attempt to return to England in a small ship and then being lost at sea. Only spurts of interest in the fate of the colonists occurred throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There was also major destruction of the fort on Roanoke Island during the American Civil War, so most of the artifacts that could shed light upon the mystery had been destroyed.

I feel that the efforts made by those involved with establishing the Roanoke Colony were a learning experience for both investors and those who became colonists. We can see that England was involved in many activities during the attempts to establish permanent colony in Roanoke. These activities being a war with Spain, and acquiring treasures and natural resources to enrich England. Granted this was a new and unfamiliar part of the world for the colonists, I feel proper efforts were not made to ensure a permanent colony. For example, instead of raising their own crops and using hunting skills, they relied on the food supplies that were brought with the ships and then relied on the kindness of the natives to supply their food needs.

The Roanoke colonists made matters worse when John White decided to teach the enemy native tribe a lesson by attacking them in retaliation of killing one of the colonists and the men left behind in the second expedition. Instead of attacking their enemy they attacked their friends the Croatoans by accident. This was the second time an incident of this nature had happened. It had occurred in the second expedition with Ralph Lane (Governor of the colony left by the second expedition). Also I believe that mistakes of this nature reveal the possible fate of the lost colony, by assuming that relations between the colonist and the Croatoans had deteriorated. However, I do not believe that this tribe killed the members of Roanoke, I think that they refused to supply them

with food supplies. From here I believe that the colonists had ventured into the interior of present day North Carolina, in search of food and a more suitable settlement. But in their venturing I believe the men were attacked by unfamiliar tribes. The women and children would have been spared and assimilated into their culture because it was the custom of the natives of this area.

It was not until 1959 that a theory was openly agreed upon by a group of historian and scholars. They theorized that the colony did go to the Croatan village and may have been assimilated into the tribe. It was possible that they later moved to one of two areas; the Chesapeake Bay area or the Chowan River area. They also agreed that there was the possibility that the group disbanded. If the colonists did not go to the Croatan village, it was surmised that they were attacked by the Powhatan and the women and children were taken captive.

However, the panel did not agree on one solid theory because they lack any physical evidence. These few possibilities may be as close as anyone will get to an answer.

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