

The Lost Colony of Roanoke

Anthony Wilson

Junior Division

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“History hath triumphed over time, which beside it nothing but eternity hath triumphed over.”

-Sir Walter Raleigh

Introduction

In the late 1500s, England was forced to compromise one hundred seventeen lives for the sake of colonization of the new world. Poor relations with the native Indians, miscommunication between the commander of the second Roanoke expedition and John White, the governor of Roanoke, and limited resources due to England's naval battle with Spain contributed to this. Due to these conflicts, the colony of Roanoke disappeared without a trace. Only one word, carved into a post, left any hard evidence to where they may have gone.

Previous British Exploration in the New World

England had shown very little interest in colonization of the New World until 1578, when Queen Elizabeth I granted a patent to Sir Humphrey Gilbert to colonize North America. She was hoping to find the mythical Northwest Passage that supposedly led to the Orient, but was also competing with Spain for control of the Western Hemisphere. Once Gilbert had reached North America in 1583, he established a small settlement on what is now St. John's, Newfoundland, but he lost at sea shortly after that (“Roanoke Colony”).

Sir Walter Raleigh

Sir Walter Raleigh was the leader of the Roanoke expeditions, and part of Queen Elizabeth's court. Queen Elizabeth was quite charmed by Raleigh, and he soon became one of her favorites. The queen even made Raleigh her confidant and advisor at court. Gifts, of course, came as part of being the queen's close friend. She gifted Raleigh with huge estates and a license to export textiles and other goods. A grateful Raleigh felt as though he should repay the queen, so he reputed his deceased brother's patent to explore and colonize the New World, and signed it under his own name in 1583 (Bailey).

Raleigh's first attempt at colonization in the New World happened in 1583. This did not fare well, and the ships ended up wrecked in the north Atlantic. Raleigh tried again in 1584, and this time he sent two ships, commanded by Philip Amadas and Arthur Barlowe, to a little island just off the coast of what is now North Carolina (Roberts). Raleigh had chosen this spot for its inaccessibility, as it was surrounded by very shallow water and only light craft would be able to float upon it. Raleigh had also intended this island to be used for repairing and resupplying ships (Kupperman). The natives there seemed friendly, and Amadas and Barlowe took back two of them to England, prompting Raleigh to be knighted (Bailey).

Grenville and Lane's Path of Destruction

Only a year later, in 1585, another seven ships were on their way to Roanoke, led by Sir Walter Raleigh's cousin, Sir Richard Grenville. This time they carried one hundred eight colonists. They were mostly soldiers, but there was also a scientist, Thomas Harriot/Hariot, and a mapmaker and artist, John White. As the ships neared land, one of them struck a sandbar and sank, losing all of the winter's food provisions. The men, upon landing ashore, traveled to a few native tribes, and made peace with them. This peace, however, did not last long, as the natives were accused of stealing a silver cup from the men. Grenville retaliated by burning one of the native villages. The men then had little food and could not trade with the natives after making enemies of them, so Grenville returned to England to gather supplies. This left Ralph Lane, an explorer, in charge. Winter arrived and the soldiers began making demands to the natives to trade for food, which soon became threats. Soon, a battle between the colonists and natives ensued, leaving a native chief beheaded (Roberts). In 1586, Sir Francis Drake, a privateer, stopped by Roanoke and brought the failing colonists back to England. Grenville had been on his way with more colonists, so, upon finding the fort abandoned, he left fifteen men to guard the fort ("The Mystery of Roanoke").

The Colonist's Story

The new one hundred seventeen colonists were actually instructed to sail to, and colonize, the Chesapeake Bay, but the commander of the ships refused to sail beyond Roanoke, stranding the colonists there (Kupperman). This commander, who may have actually been working for the Spanish, also took two of the colonists' ships with him, leaving them with little food and foul water. As the colonists made it to shore, they were greeted with a disturbing discovery: the only trace of the fifteen soldiers left by Grenville was a single skeleton (Roberts). Only a few days after their arrival, the colonists made another discovery: George Howe, one of the colonists, was found dead after going out to hunt for crabs. He was face down floating in the reeds (Miller 127).

Twenty-seven days after the colonists' arrival, John White's daughter, Eleanor Dare, gave birth to a daughter - the first English child born in the New World. Eleanor and her husband Ananias christened her Virginia (Kupperman). A few days later, a boy was delivered to Dyonis and Margery Harvie. After the short period celebration, John White made a fateful decision to leave his family and sail back to England for much needed supplies. The colonists, however, were already fed up with Roanoke, and they were planning on traveling "*fifty miles into the main*" (Miller 13). White left them with the instructions to carve the location of where they might end up into a tree or a post, and a pattee cross (see appendix II) as a distress signal if needed (Miller 13). This was the last anyone saw of the ill-fated colonists.

John White's Story

Sadly, John White was not able to return to Roanoke as soon as he had hoped ("The Mystery of Roanoke"). White had promised to return in three months, but it ended up taking him three *years* (Miller 4). White's predicament was the result of years of tensions between Spain and England finally erupting. The Spanish armada was on its way to England, and England needed all the resources it could get. To his dismay, White was not able to take any boats back to Roanoke, as everything was being saved for the battle Spain was waging against England. Finally, after England had, against all odds, beaten Spain, John White was able to return to Roanoke ("The Mystery of Roanoke").

White was able to take three ships and two shallops, light sailboats, back with him. The flagship was called the *Hopewell*, the two other ships were called the *Little John*, and the *John Evangelist* (Miller 5). According to John White's own account, five days out, both of the shallops sank, "by the boatswain's negligence" (Miller 5). Twelve days after they set sail, the *Hopewell* encountered a London merchantman, and two new boats were bought to replace the sunken shallops (Miller 6). At the end of April, White's expedition reached the Caribbean, and finally, three years after White said goodbye to his family, they arrived at Virginia (Miller 6).

On August tenth, they were forced to anchor on the northeast end of Croatoan Island (see map, appendix I), due to a long and brutal storm (Miller 8). Five days later, they reached Hatorask Island, and White wrote that he saw, "a great smoke rise near the place I left our colony in 1587" (Miller 9). The morning after the sighting, as they were preparing to set sail, they saw "another great smoke coming from the Kindrikers Mounts" (Miller 9). They decided to go to this second fire first, which actually was coming from Hatorask Island, the opposite direction of Roanoke (Miller 9). They hiked through the island, looking for any sign of humanity, but they found nothing. There was no sign that anyone had been there at all (Miller 9). The following morning, the men decided to look for water, as White's hastily made decision to search Hatorask had deprived them of their water. After they had gone looking for water, the men boarded the *Hopewell*, and headed for Port Ferdinando. As the men closed in on the shore, White realized the morning search for water had been a calamitous choice, as the tide was then high. Before them laid a path of sand-choked, churning water. What made matters even more severe, was that a strong wind blew directly northeast, causing the water to splash up against the sandbar. The men could do nothing about it. They just had to push through it. White's boat made it, but not without nearly capsizing. The crest of a wave had sloshed over the boat and had spoiled most of their goods. The men did make it to shore, but they were forced to watch in horror as the second boat came sailing in. This boat did capsize, and only four of the crew were saved. Robert Coleman was one of the men who drowned (Miller 11).

This struck a depressing chord with the remaining crew, as Coleman was not even a sailor. He was looking for his family, just like John White. The crew fixed the boat, and they set sail once again.

The men finally came into view of Roanoke, but night had already fallen. On August eighteenth, the men finally reached the north end of Roanoke, and saw footprints “*of two or three sorts*” scattered across the beach (Miller 13). Shortly after finding these footprints, White came across the letters *CRO* carved into a tree. This puzzled him, but he kept looking for signs of the colonists. As the men walked up to the leftover palisade, they saw a full word carved into “*one of the chief trees or posts at the right side of the entrance*”... “*in fair letters was graven CROATOAN*”... “*without any cross or signs of distress,*” John White wrote (Miller 14). Inside the palisade, the men did find a few remaining items: bars of iron, lead casts, and a few other heavy things thrown about in disarray (Miller 14). White then made the decision to go to Croatoan Island after finding that word on the tree. Sadly, this would mark the end of White’s journey to find his family, as a hurricane forced them eastward, provoking White to call off the search, and return to England (Miller 18).

The Aftermath

Years after the Roanoke colony’s disappearance in 1590, England had already established a permanent settlement in the Chesapeake called Jamestown. The people of Jamestown sent out search parties to look for anything that might indicate where the doomed settlers may have gone, but this only offered hints (Miller 4). There are many theories that may indicate what happened, but the most widely held theory is that they mingled with another friendly tribe, and became a whole other tribe. Jamestown settlers asked natives if they knew anything about the colonists, and were told tales of white settlements, and of tribes who could read and speak English and dressed similarly to Europeans. There was even a report of a blonde, fair skinned boy dressed as a native. This tribe that the colonists might have blended with may be the Lumbee tribe. Lumbee oral history links them to the Roanoke colony, and some of their

surnames helps to support this theory. Family names of the Roanoke colony, like Dial, Hyatt and Taylor, were shared by the Lumbee members as early as 1719 (“What Happened”).

Another theory is that the colony fell victim to the natives. There might have been a shift in power with the native tribes, and natives with whom the settlers were at peace with may have lost control over that area, resulting in hostile natives taking over. There’s even a theory that the Spanish may have killed them off. The Spanish settlements of the West Indies definitely knew of the Roanoke settlement. A Roanoke settler named Darby Glande went to Puerto Rico, and reportedly told the Spanish officials the location of the settlement (“What Happened”). This could have led the Spanish to Roanoke, causing them to wipe out the colonists.

Conclusion

During the late 1500s, Britain was looking to expand their kingdom. They looked to the New World for this. They sent expeditions to what is now North Carolina, and picked out Roanoke Island as their settlement. Due to many conflicts that arose, such as Grenville and Lane’s elimination of peace between the colonists and the natives, and little resources due to and ongoing battle between England and Spain, England was forced to compromise one hundred seventeen lives for the sake of colonization. Today we look back on this as a pivotal moment in the colonization of North America.

Appendix I



Map of what was then Virginia, drawn by John white. Source: Manikas, Bill. "Lost Colony of Roanoke."

Salem Press Encyclopedia, 2013. EBSCOhost,

search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,cpid&custid=s7324964&db=t6o&AN

[=89453585&site=src_ic-live&scope=site](https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,cpid&custid=s7324964&db=t6o&AN=89453585&site=src_ic-live&scope=site)

Appendix II



Pattee Cross. Source: *Cross pattee (Heraldry)*. Photograph. *Britannica ImageQuest*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 May 2016.
quest.eb.com/search/309_1155608/1/309_1155608/cite. Accessed 25 Jan 2018.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Cross pattee (Heraldry). Photograph. *Britannica ImageQuest*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 25 May 2016. quest.eb.com/search/309_1155608/1/309_1155608/cite. Accessed 25 Jan 2018.

The cross pattee was the sign John White asked the Roanoke colonists to use if they were in distress. This picture is important to my paper because it helps me visualize what the colonists needed to do just before John White's voyage back to England.

Manikas, Bill. "Lost Colony of Roanoke." *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, 2013.

EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,cpid&custid=s7324964&db=t6o&AN=89453585&site=src_ic-live&scope=site

This is a map of the east coast of North Carolina. This map, drawn by John White is important to my paper because it helped me get a visual of how far John White had to travel in his attempt to find his family.

Secondary Sources:

Bailey, Ellen. "Sir Walter Raleigh." ["Sir Walter Raleigh"]. *Sir Walter Raleigh*, 8/1/2017, pp. 1-3. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,cpid&custid=s7324964&db=khh&AN=19808929&site=ehost-live&scope=site

Sir Walter Raleigh was the leader of the Roanoke expeditions. This website was important to my paper because it helped me to understand why Raleigh was doing these expeditions.

Kupperman, Karen Ordahl. "Lost Colony." *World Book Student*, World Book, 2017, www.worldbookonline.com/student/article?id=ar331400. Accessed 7 Dec. 2017.

The Lost colony took place on Roanoke Island. This website was important to my paper because it helped me to understand the story of the lost colonists from the colonists side.

Miller, Lee. *Roanoke: Solving the Mystery of the Lost Colony*. MFJ Books, 2012.

I used this book to tell the story of how John White tried to find his family. This book was important to my paper because it helped my understand the story of how John White was separated from his family, and how he tried to find them.

"Roanoke Colony." *American History*, ABC-CLIO, 2017, americanhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/264971. Accessed 10 Dec. 2017.

This source describes events from 1578 all the way to John White's search for his family. This website was important to my paper because it helped me to understand England's colonization efforts leading up to Roanoke.

Roberts, Linda. "Setting Sail." ["Cobblestone"]. *Cobblestone*, vol. 15, no. 4, Apr. 1994, p. 4. EBSCOhost, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType= cookie, ip, cpid&custid=s7324964&db=khh&AN=9404077552&site=src_ic-live&scope =site](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,cpid&custid=s7324964&db=khh&AN=9404077552&site=src_ic-live&scope=site).

I used this source to tell about what happened before the colonists landed on Roanoke. This website was important to my paper because it helped me understand what happened before the colonists went missing.

"The Mystery of Roanoke Island." ["Kid's View of Colonial America"]. *Kid's View of Colonial America*, 8/1/2017, p. 24. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,cpid&custid=s7324964&db=khh&AN=3356236&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

This source describes the events from Raleigh's decision to colonize Roanoke, up to possible theories to where they may have gone. This website helped me to understand the events up till the colonists disappearance.

"What Happened to the Lost Colony at Roanoke?" *Howstuffworks*, HowStuffWorks, 23 Sept. 2008, history.howstuffworks.com/history-vs-myth/roanoke-colony.htm. Accessed 27 Jan. 2018.

This source describes theories to where the colonists may have gone. This website was important to my paper because it helped me to understand how diverse the theories are, and how people are still investing their time into figuring out what happened to the colonists.