



Failed European Colonies in the New World

Advisor: Kathleen A. Duval, Associate Professor of History, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, National Humanities Center Fellow.

Framing Question

Why did some European attempts to establish colonies in the New World fail?

Understanding

Some European attempts to colonize the New World failed not only because of physical hardships and deprivation but also because of cultural misunderstandings on the part of both the colonizers and the native inhabitants.

Text

[A letter from Jesuit Priests Luis de Quirós and Juan Baptista de Segura to Governor of Cuba Juan de Hinistrosa, Sept. 12, 1570.](#) Scroll down for the English translation. Pay attention to the footnotes; not only do they help explain what is going on in Ajacán but also provide insight into the difficulty of interpreting the text.



Diego Gutiérrez, "Americae sive quartae orbis partis nova et exactissima descriptio," 1562 (detail)

Background

In 1570 Spanish Jesuits Juan Baptista de Segura and Luis de Quirós along with seven other missionaries, both clerical and lay, founded Ajacán on the shores of the Chesapeake Bay, intending to convert the local Indians to Catholicism. Because Father de Segura had seen how soldiers undermined the work of missionaries in Florida, he forbade them to accompany his small band. The Indians spoke an Algonquian language and were ancestors of the Powhatan, whom the English founders of Jamestown met in 1607. We do not know what they called themselves in 1570, and their seventeenth-century name may have come from the name of their leader at that time. For clarity in this lesson we will call them Powhatan. As you analyze the text, keep in mind that these Indians existed in a culture all their own.

A Spanish slaving ship had captured a young man from this tribe in 1561. In his nine years away from home, he was baptized into the Catholic faith, christened with the new name Luis de Velasco (we do not know what he called himself), and traveled to Spain, where he met the king. While in Spain, de Velasco said that he wanted to go

home and convert his people to Christianity. He led the Jesuits to the Chesapeake, where they founded Ajacán. About five months later de Velasco and the Powhatan slaughtered eight of the missionaries.

To help sort out the voices in the letter, note that the first five paragraphs were written by Father de Quiros. Paragraphs six and seven were written by Father de Segura, and the final three paragraphs are again the work of Father de Quiros.

Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?

Text Analysis

Excerpt 1

They seemed to think that don Luis had risen from the dead and come down from heaven, and since all who remained are his relatives, they are greatly consoled in him.

They have recovered their courage and hope that God may seek to favor them, saying that they want to be like don Luis, begging us to remain in this land with them.... Thus we have felt the good will which this tribe is showing. On the other hand, as I have said, they are so famished, that all believe they will perish of hunger and cold this winter.

Activity: Investigate – Find the Lost Colony

Examine the evidence and historical context supporting theories on the disappearance of an early English colony.



1. In what condition were the Powhatan when the Spanish arrived?

2. The Powhatan seem to take de Velasco's return as a good omen. Why? What might they have thought he and the Spanish could do for them?

3. How would the translation of Indian religious concepts into terms like "Heaven" and "God" have affected the priests? How might they affect Governor de Hinistrosa?

4. How might the priests have understood de Velasco's claim that the Powhatan wanted to be like him? What might the Powhatan have meant?

5. At this early stage, why might the Powhatan have wanted the priests to remain with them?

6. Why would it have been important to tell Governor Hinistrosa about the Indians' desire to "be like" de Velasco and about their desire to have the missionaries remain with them?

Excerpt 2

Seeing then the good will that this tribe has shown, great hope is had of its conversion [to Catholicism] and of the service of Our Lord and His Majesty and of an entrance into the mountains and to China, etc. Therefore, it has seemed best to Father to risk remaining despite such scanty stores [low food supplies], because on our trip we have consumed two of the four barrels of biscuit and the small amount of flour which was given us for the journey. We had to help the entire ship with some supplies, as we were ill-provisioned for the journey.... As it touches the service of Our Lord and His Majesty, it would be best that you see to it that we are supplied with all speed possible. If it cannot be done this winter, it is imperative that some provisions arrive some time during March or at the beginning of April so that we can give seeds to the tribe for planting. At this time the planting is done here, and thus many of the tribes will come here after being scattered over the region in search of food and there will be a good opportunity for the Holy Gospel. The chief has sought this very thing especially.

7. In the entire text the Jesuits mention the Powhatan's "good will" three times. Why might they have done so? How do the Spanish interpret this "good will"? Why might the Powhatan have shown them "good will" at this early stage?

8. How well equipped were the Jesuits to establish a mission?

9. What were the Jesuits' goals in establishing Ajacán? If the Powhatan asked them to remain in their land, as de Velasco said they did, were the Indians embracing the goals of the missionaries?

10. Why did the priests write for provisions?

11. What did the chief ask from the Jesuits? Why might he have given such specific instructions?

Excerpt 3

By a bit of blundering (I don't know who on the ship did it) someone made some sort of a poor trade in food. I see now the misfortune which followed, in that while up till now the Indians whom we met on the way would give to us from their poverty, now they are reluctant when they see they receive no trinkets for their ears of corn. They have brought the ears of corn and other foods and asked that they be given something when they handed them over. They say that they have done that with the others. Since Father had forbidden that they be given something, so that they would not be accustomed to receiving it and then afterwards not want to bargain with us, the Indians took the food away with them. Thus it seemed good to Father [de Segura] that he should tell this to you since we must live in this land mainly with what the Indians give us. Take care that whoever comes here in no wise [way] barter with the Indians, if need be under threat of severe punishments, and if they should bring something to barter, orders will be given that don Louis [de Velasco] force them to give in return something equal to whatever was bartered, and that they may not deal with the Indians except in the way judged fitting here.

12. What "blundering" may have occurred? Why did it so upset the priests?

13. How did the Powhatan respond to the "blundering"?

14. After the priests wrote this letter, the ship that brought them to the Chesapeake left, carrying the letter to the governor of Cuba. The next time sailors arrived, they discovered that the Powhatan had killed all of the Jesuits. What do you think happened? Can you come up with multiple theories?



Indian village circa 1585

Glossary

timorous: fearful, shy

doleful: sad, mournful

vehement: intense, passionate

treachery: betrayal, disloyalty

Text

Letter from Luis de Quirós and Juan Baptista de Segura to Juan de Hinistrosa, September 12, 1570 (B. Smith, transcriber), Buckingham Smith Papers, vol. 2, Florida, 1526–1743, New York Historical Society. Translation by Susan M. Smith.

http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Letter_from_Luis_de_QuirA

Images

Diego Gutiérrez, “Americae sive quartae orbis partis nova et exactissima descriptio...” (Map of the Western Hemisphere), 1562, detail with Bahía de Santa María (Chesapeake Bay). Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Geography & Map Division, G3290 1562 .G7 Vault Oversize. <http://www.loc.gov/resource/g3290.ct000342/>

John White, “Indian Village of Pomeiooc,” c.1585. Licensed by the Trustees of the British Museum. Copyright the British Museum. http://www.virtualjamestown.org/images/white_debry_html/white31.html

Theodor de Bry, “A weroan or great Lorde of Virginia,” 1590. Academic Affairs Library, UNC-CH. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2003. <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/hariot/hariot.html>

Theodore de Bry, “The arriual of the Englishemen in Virginia.” Line engraving, 1590. John Carter Brown Library at Brown University. http://www.virtualjamestown.org/images/white_debry_html/debry123.html

Theodore de Bry, “Map of Virginia.” Engraving, 1590. East Carolina University Digital Collections. <https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/hakluyt/view.aspx?p=townes&id=1184>

“Governor John White finding no trace of the colony of Roanoke enroute to Virginia in 1590.” Color engraving, 19th century. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/12/131208-roanoke-lost-colony-discovery-history-raleigh/>

John White, “La Virginea Pars,” c.1585 (detail). Courtesy of ©The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved. http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/media_player?mets_filename=evm00003108mets.xml