The English Colonies: Frontier of Exclusion

Thus far you have read much extra material this week about the Spanish and French colonies in North America. Your "textbook" also gives brief attention to the Dutch presence in New Netherland. The English colonies dominate most of our reading this week and so we spend less time on them here because the textbook readings cover them in such depth.

As you read about the English colonization in North America, keep in mind that the initial attempts in the 16th century failed. Jamestown's founding in 1607 marked the first permanent English settlement on the North American continent. Note that 2007 marked the four-hundredth anniversary of that founding.

Notice that in neither Jamestown nor the New England colonies did the English colonists commonly intermarry with native peoples. In the English colonies, Indian people were excluded from colonial society and increasingly pushed off their homelands as the English settlers demanded more and more land. For these reasons, some historians refer to the English colonies as a Frontier of Exclusion.

Jamestown's Early Years

As you read about Jamestown, keep in mind that the colony was a corporate venture. In 1606 King James I granted a charter to a joint-stock company The Virginia Company. Virginia Company actually consisted of two companies, the Plymouth Company which received a charter for land between 38 and 45 degrees latitude (Potomac River to Maine) and London Company which received from 34 to 41 degrees (Cape Fear River to New York Bay). The company's charter granted future colonists all the rights and liberties of citizens living in England (important for our later investigations leading to the American Revolution).

When the first colonists landed on the Jamestown peninsula in May 1607, they found a low and swampy area. The 100 men built a fort and triangular stockade, but did little else to secure their survival for these were gentlemen seeking wealth and adventure in the "New World." [Did you play the "Jamestown" game and choose a different place to land? http://www.historyglobe.com/jamestown/]

They lived among 24,000 Algonquian people united in a confederacy led by Powhatan. See the English Colonies: In Their Own Words folder for Powhatan's views.
Although Powhatan regarded the English suspiciously, he hoped to use them for trade goods and in alliance against his enemies. Powhatan saw the English as inferior for they didn't seem to be able to hunt or fish, had no women, and died by the scores settling in a swampy place the Indians had no use for. Powhatan attacked the English in May 1607 then sought an alliance in the summer and later engaged in more raids. Powhatan needed to limit English expansion, but he wanted the English as allies against his enemies to west and against troublemakers in his own confederacy. In these early years, the Indians often gave the colonists food and tried to teach them Indian agricultural techniques so that they could feed themselves.

Meanwhile the English engaged in their own diplomacy with Powhatan. In fall 1608 Christopher Newport sailed up James River and negotiated a treaty with Powhatan. Newport gave Indians glass beads, pocket knives, and scissors. He gave Powhatan a basin, a bed, and a scarlet cloak, but when Powhatan would not kneel to receive a crown Newport pushed him down hoping to declare him subject of the king. Powhatan gave Newport his old moccasins and his own fur mantle. Newport planted a cross and claimed the area for the king. When Powhatan asked him the meaning, Newport said that the two arms of the cross represented the two of them joined in friendship.

Unlike the French whose New France colony was based on commerce, the English from the beginning set their sights on acquiring Indian land. The English colonists at Jamestown (primarily men) saw themselves as conquistadors, looking for gold and above physical labor. They survived only with food given by the Indians. When the Indians didn't bring food, the colonists raided Indian stores. Just 4 months after they landed at Jamestown, half of the original colonists were dead. More colonists arrived in January 1608, but again none were farmers.

Captain John Smith imposed military style discipline to organize work gangs, to build new housing and to gather corn for winter. Smith was the son of a tenant farmer who became a mercenary, fighting in Transylvania and against the Turks in Hungary and escaped from years of slavery in Istanbul to Russia. Because of his experience, Smith was recruited for the Jamestown expedition. He had little patience for the gentlemen of Jamestown and he pursued an aggressive, often ruthless, policy against Indians. In October 1609 Smith was forced to return to England after an injury and the "Starving Time" began.

New settlers in 1609 brought typhus and plague that killed some and weakened others. Powhatan and his people attacked Jamestown in retaliation for raids that the English had conducted on their camps. The gentlemen had relied on the Indians for food and so as winter approached they had few provisions. During the winter of 1609-10, the settlers became so desperate for food that some resorted to cannibalism. In the spring, of the
500 Jamestown colonists in the fall of 1609 only 60 still lived. See the English Colonies: In Their Own Words folder for an account of the cannibalism.

©Susan Vetter 2009