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The Lost Colony of Roanoke

By Allison Wisdom

The Legend of Roanoke

Roanoke - a colony originally disregarded as a failed attempt to establish a British presence in the New World - has since become one of the most popular modern-day legends. It has been over 400 years since the colony was discovered, abandoned, and yet the fate of Roanoke is still being discussed. Most of the folklore surrounding Roanoke is focused on the mysterious disappearance of its settlers, leaving out more of the seemingly mundane aspects, such as the origin of the colony as well as life within it. However, both of those factors help to provide context to the tragic end of Roanoke, along with a better understanding of the rationale behind the theories of the fate of the settlers. There is one theory in particular that is more evidence-based than others, suggesting that the colonists moved and intermarried with the nearby native population. Before evidence and theories can be discussed, the foundation of Roanoke must be laid first, beginning with a man named Walter Raleigh.

Walter Raleigh and His Quest Against Spain

Walter Raleigh was a multifaceted character, known for his poetry, his rise, and subsequent fall, within the court of Queen Elizabeth, but most notably for this essay, his “role in colonization and conquest.”¹ Since 1583, Raleigh had held the position of “chief promoter of English colonies in America.”² His hope was to play an integral role in England’s struggle against Spain to become the major New World power by attacking Spain’s colonies in the New World. Raleigh thought that by establishing colonies in the New World where no other European nation had settled before, then England could usurp Spain’s claim to dominating much of the Americas. Numerous men came together to aid Raleigh in his plan to settle colonies along the coast of North America, including two men both named Richard Hakluyts (cousins), who would garner financial and political support, and Simon Fernandes, who would pilot Raleigh’s ships to the New World. However, two especially important men to the quest were Thomas Hariot, an accomplished scientist, and

¹ Moore, Cecelia. “Walter Raleigh: Architect of Empire.” *Journal of Southern History* 87, no. 2 (May 2021): 321–22. doi:10.1353/soh.2021.0045.

² Horn, James. *A Kingdom Strange: The Brief and Tragic History of the Lost Colony of Roanoke* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 31.

John White, an explorer and cartographer. Since RaleighRaleigh himself would not be sailing to the New World, he would need Hariot's mastery of detailed writing and White's artistry skills to record what they saw.³ Now that RaleighRaleigh had established who would help lead the expedition, he needed to decide where he would plant the colony. RaleighRaleigh envisioned the colony acting as a base for English privateering as a way to make a profit while simultaneously harassing the Spanish. Therefore, his choice of location was dependent upon two factors: (1) somewhere with access to the route Spanish treasure ships took and (2) was well hidden in order to protect the colony from attacks by the Spanish. With this in mind, RaleighRaleigh selected North Carolina to establish the first English New World colony. Finally, in March 1584, RaleighRaleigh received a patent from Queen Elizabeth to "discover and possess unknown lands in America."⁴ Within a few weeks, both of Raleigh'sRaleigh ships, led by Captain Amadas and Arthur Barlowe, would cross the Atlantic, headed for the New World.

³ Donegan, Kathleen. "What Happened in Roanoke: Ralph Lane's Narrative Incursion." *Early American Literature*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2013, pp. 285–314. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24476352>.

⁴ James, 38.

The Expedition

By July 1584, the ships arrived off the coast of North Carolina, on a series of sandy islands known as the Outer Banks. Amadas and Barlowe, along with a few soldiers, disembarked and rowed to Hatarask Island. As customary, the men declared the region to be under England's possession, regardless of the fact there were no Indians present to witness this proclamation. The men explored the island, finding it to be fertile and ripe for exploration. After three days, the men encountered three Algonquian Indians (an umbrella term used to encompass all tribes that spoke Algonquian), one of whom they willingly took back to their ship and presented with gifts. The following day, forty to fifty natives traveled to Hatarask Island, including Granganimeo, the brother of the "king" Wingina of the Secotan tribe, who resided on Roanoke Island.⁵ The English and Indians traded various goods, creating an amicable relationship between the two groups.

⁵ Barlowe, Arthur. "Meeting Granganimeo; an excerpt from "The first voyage made to the coasts of America" by Arthur Barlowe (1589)" Encyclopedia Virginia, Virginia Humanities, December 7, 2020, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/meeting-granganimeo-an-excerpt-from-the-first-voyage-made-to-the-coasts-of-america-by-arthur-barlowe-1589/>.

After a month, Amadas and Barlowe were ready to return to England, bringing with them two Indians to present to Queen Elizabeth, and report their findings to Raleigh. Raleigh, most excitedly, the island of Roanoke. The men reached England in the fall of 1584, finding that their nation's relationship with Spain had declined even further, and that Raleigh had become frantic in his planning to build an English presence in the New World to thwart Spain's growing empire.

Roanoke was decided to be an ideal placement due to its fertile land, the friendly natives that inhabited the island, and its prime location for raiding Spanish ships. With much effort from Raleigh, along with the help of his associates, Queen Elizabeth was convinced to grant permission to Raleigh to settle Virginia (aptly named after the "Virgin Queen") and awarded him the title of Lord and Governor of Virginia.⁶

Roanoke

Once again, Raleigh would not be joining the expedition to the land he had claimed for England. Sir Richard Grenville, Raleigh's cousin, was sent in his stead. Amadas and Barlowe returned as captains, as did Fernandes, Hariot, and

⁶ House of Commons. "Sir Walter Raleigh's Patent to Settle Virginia (1584)" Encyclopedia Virginia, Virginia Humanities, December 7, 2020, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/sir-walter-raleighs-patent-to-settle-virginia-1584/>

White, each in their respective roles. Manteo and Wanchese, the two Indians brought to England from the previous expedition, would also be making the journey home. As the colony was conceived with military rather than familial goals in mind, there were no women or children on the ships headed for Roanoke. In April 1585, Grenville led the first wave to establish Roanoke, consisting of five ships, with 200 men to follow later in a second wave. One of Grenville's chief officers was Ralph Lane, a veteran of the campaign to colonize Ireland, who would be left in command of the colony. After a two-month voyage, the first fleet arrived at the Outer Banks. Grenville sent a few men ahead to alert Wingina of their arrival, and then constructed a small party of men, including White, who, guided by Manteo, would visit several Secotan villages while in the search of an appropriate site for the settlement. During this search, Grenville and his party encountered some Indians who were not as genial in their reception of the Europeans as the men had become accustomed to.

There was even an incident in which the men believed a silver cup had been stolen from them by the natives, and when the cup was not returned, Grenville sent soldiers under Amadas' command to

burn down the village and nearby crops.⁷ This incident would set a precedent for how the leaders of Roanoke had a method of establishing dominance through violence rather than diplomacy. Contrary to his previously erratic and terrorizing behavior, Grenville visited with Granganimeo to amicably seal their agreement to allow the settlers to establish a colony near the Secotan village on Roanoke Island. By August 1585, Grenville, both confident in Lane's ability to govern the young colony, as well as anticipating a second fleet of ships carrying men and supplies, returned to England to report the success the settlement had experienced thus far. However, both Grenville and Lane were unaware that the second fleet had been detained to harass Spanish shipping and would not be arriving to Roanoke anytime soon, leaving the men vulnerable to the approaching winter.

“He Who Watches Closely”

Along with the decreasing temperatures and morale within the colony, relations with the Secotan Indians also deteriorated. The colonists relied heavily on the natives to provide food, which was becoming increasingly difficult as the winter progressed.

⁷ Quinn, David B. *Set Fair for Roanoke: Voyages and Colonies, 1584-1606*. (Chapel Hill: Published for America's Four Hundredth Anniversary Committee by the University of North Carolina Press, 1985), pg 72.

Another, more pressing contributor to the rising tension between the two groups, was the horrendous toll that European diseases were taking on the Secotan.⁸ After the death of Granganimeo, Wingina decided that the Secotans could no longer ally themselves with the colonists, as the Europeans had brought so much death and hardship to his people. Wingina changed his name to Pemisapan, roughly translated to “he who watches closely”, bringing an end to any kind of amiability left between the Secotan and settlers. Pemisapan attempted to form an alliance with the Mangoaks, Moratucs, and Weapemeocs in order to organize a large-scale attack on Roanoke. However, Skiko, son of Menatonon, chief of the Chowanoc Indians, who had allied themselves with the English, informed Lane of Pemisapan’s plot. Lane quickly devised a plan to eliminate the threat Pemisapan posed. On June 1, 1586, Lane, along with 26 men, led a surprise attack on the town, destroying the Secotan settlement and killing many, including Pemisapan.⁹ Although the English were

⁸ Hariot, Thomas. "Diseases that Ravaged Indian Towns; an excerpt from “A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia” by Thomas Hariot (1588)" Encyclopedia Virginia, Virginia Humanities, December 7, 2020. <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/diseases-that-ravaged-indian-towns-an-excerpt-from-a-briefe-and-true-report-of-the-new-found-land-of-virginia-by-thomas-hariot-1588>.

⁹ Lane, Ralph. "Ralph Lane on the Killing of Pemisapan; an excerpt from “An account of the particularities of the employments of the English men left in Virginia” (1589)" Encyclopedia Virginia, Virginia Humanities.

successful in their mission, Lane was uncertain of how the other Indian tribes would react to the attack and murder of an Indian chief, who was once a friend. In addition, Roanoke had lost their only food source as they did not plant their own crops and had made themselves completely dependent on the Secotans' ability to provide food. To Lane, Roanoke's future as a colony seemed bleak. A week after Pemisapan was killed, a surprise fleet of English ships, led by Sir Francis Drake, arrived at Roanoke's shore. Drake intended for his arrival to bring relief to the colony, but instead a sudden hurricane resulted in the destruction of many of Drake's ships and the loss of several men. Lane, along with the rest of the colonists, weary and disheartened, opted to abandon Roanoke and sail with Drake back to England. However, Lane was convinced that Roanoke could be successful if located farther north of its original site, and was intent on convincing Raleigh to try again.

Return to Roanoke

RaleighRaleigh was infuriated and mystified when Drake, along with Lane and the rest of the Roanoke colonists, returned to England. Unbeknownst to Drake and Lane, RaleighRaleigh had already sent an expedition of ships containing provisions and 200 colonists, which arrived at Roanoke shortly after the men had left the island. Lane explained to RaleighRaleigh that he had

abandoned Roanoke as it lacked the amenities to thrive, in addition to the harbor not being big enough for the large ships. Raleigh wanted to send in order to deliver supplies and harass the Spanish.

Determined to achieve his goal of utilizing Virginia as a major pawn in the war against the Spanish, Raleigh set plans for a second attempt into motion. After a discussion with White and Hariot, Raleigh decided that not only would the next Roanoke need a new location, but a different caliber of settlers. Instead of rugged and volatile soldiers, the new colony would be made up of civilian families, and John White would be their leader. In 1587, three ships carrying around 150 passengers headed for the Chesapeake Bay region, once again guided by Simon Fernandes. It was intended for White to make a stop at Roanoke to return two Indians, Manteo and Towaye, to their people and from there, move along the Chesapeake to locate a site for their settlement. However, a tumultuous voyage and a growing feud between Fernandes and White resulted in Fernandes and the sailors deserting White and the settlers at Roanoke Island. Luckily, the structures built by the first colonists were still standing and remained uninhabited, providing temporary shelters. However, the colonists' good fortune would not last long. Shortly after their arrival, a colonist named George Howe was wading in a creek when he was ambushed and

brutally killed by Secotan Indians, sending a message to the new colonists that they were not safe from, nor prepared for, an attack from their native neighbors.

The Beginning of the End

White was determined to locate and extinguish this newfound threat to the settlement, and sought answers from Manteo's tribe, the Croatoans. The Croatoans were much more welcoming in their reception of the English, and informed them that the attack on Howe was by "Secotan warriors, a 'remnant' of Wingina's people".¹⁰ In an attempt to establish peace between the Secotan Indians and the settlers, Captain Edward Stafford, on behalf of the English, proposed a truce, and requested a decision to be made within the next seven days. However, Stafford never received a response from the Secotan in the week following and White made the grave decision to attack a Dasemunkepeuc tribe as retaliation. In the early morning hours of August 9, Stafford, White, Manteo, and two dozen men ambushed who they mistakenly believed were Dasemunkepeuc people but were instead Croatoan. In the dark they could not tell they were attacking their friends rather than foe, and several were killed before their mistake was realized. White's mission was more than unsuccessful,

¹⁰ James, 156.

jeopardizing their friendship with the Croatoan as well as leaving Roanoke in the same vulnerable state as before. But White's misfortune would soon be followed with elation. On August 18, 1587, his granddaughter, Virginia Dare, was born and dubbed "the first Christian born in America". Only mere days after the birth of his granddaughter, White was elected unanimously by the colony to return to England as they believed he would be the most effective in being able to convince Raleigh to provide more supplies and ships in order to relocate the settlement to the Chesapeake Bay.¹¹ To protect the colonists while he was away, White instructed the majority of the settlers to move inland closer to friendly Indians, such as the Chowanocs, and for a smaller group to stay behind on the island to inform White of the main group's movements once he returned. If either group were forced to abandon their settlement, they were to carve the name of where they relocated to on prominent trees, and to add a cross above the name if they had to evacuate due to Indian attacks. On August 29, 1587, White set sail for England, intending to only be gone for a few short months. However, due to the war between England and

¹¹ White, John. "Roanoke Colonists' Appeal to John White; an excerpt from "The voyage of Edward Stafford and John White" by John White (1589)" Encyclopedia Virginia, Virginia Humanities, December 7, 2020. <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/roanoke-colonists-appeal-to-john-white-an-excerpt-from-the-voyage-of-edward-stafford-and-john-white-by-john-white-1589/>

Spain reaching an all-time high, White was unable to return to the island until August 18, 1590 – his granddaughter’s third birthday. White’s worst fear would soon come true as he and several other men traveled along the island, finding no signs of human life. Once they came upon the settlement, they discovered the houses dismantled and not a single colonist remained. The only evidence left behind as to what could have possibly happened to the settlers of Roanoke was the word “CRO” and “CROATOAN” carved into two trees.¹² White tried to reach Croatoan Island to find the missing colonists, but repeated bouts of bad weather prevented him from doing so and he was forced to sorrowfully return to England. White made a final venture back to Virginia in October 1590, but to his devastation, Raleigh had lost interest in the colony and White would most likely never see his friends and family again.

The Search for Answers

The most common and credible theory among historians concerning the fate of the colonists is that they migrated to

¹² White, John. "John White Returns to Roanoke; an excerpt from “The fift voyage of Master John White into the West Indies and parts of America called Virginia, in the yeere 1590” (1600)" Encyclopedia Virginia, Virginia Humanities, December 7, 2020. <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/john-white-returns-to-roanoke-an- excerpt-from-the-fift-voyage-of-master-john-white-into-the-west-indies-and-parts-of-america-called-virginia-in-the- yeere-1590-1600/>

Croatoan. This is based on White's instructions to the colony before his return to England and the clues left at the Roanoke colony. From there, they later moved to the southern shore of the Chesapeake Bay and were adopted by the Chesapeake Indians and intermarried. In fact, there is a group of Indians today with white characteristics, like light skin and blue eyes, known as the Lumbee tribe, who trace "their roots to the Lost Colony...and Indian tribes...".¹³ However, the Lumbee tribe's ancestry is speculative, and many members do not believe they are descendants of the lost Roanoke colonists. Another popular theory has similar origins, stating that the Roanoke colonists moved south and joined the Chesapeake Indians, but were instead slaughtered by Powhatan. According to John Smith, governor of Jamestown, in April 1607 (the same month Jamestown was founded), Powhatan slaughtered the Roanoke colonists and the Chesapeake Indians after being told of a prophecy that his people faced a threat from an unknown group in the lower Chesapeake.¹⁴ However, the annihilation of the Roanoke colonists by Powhatan is unlikely, as Smith is an unreliable narrator, infamous for his habit of

¹³ Padget, Cindy D. "The Lost Indians of the Lost Colony: A Critical Legal Study of the Lumbee Indians of North Carolina." *American Indian Law Review* 21, no. 2 (1997): 391–424. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20068832>

¹⁴ Parramore, Thomas C. "The 'Lost Colony' Found: A Documentary Perspective." *The North Carolina Historical Review* 78, no. 1 (2001): 67–83. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23522231>.

exaggerating events. Most historians believe that Smith's most famous story of being saved from execution by Pocahontas, Powhatan's daughter, either never happened or did not happen the way that he recounted the event.¹⁵ In addition, there is no evidence of a massacre at the Roanoke settlement.

Rise of Roanoke: The Myth

So how did one of the several failed colonies in North America rise to such fame? In the 1830s there was an influx of works romanticizing the mystery behind the lost colony, as well as Virginia Dare, turning both into important figures in American mythology and folklore. George Bancroft's book, *History of the United States, from the Discovery of the American Continent* (1834), has been credited as being the first to spark a renewed interest in the fate of the colonists. Shortly after, Elizabeth Lanesford Cushing published a short story entitled *Virginia Dare; Or, the Lost Colony* (1837) in a ladies' journal, bringing an imaginative and romantic component to the event. These works became popular due to the Jacksonian era – a time in which the rights of the common man were being advocated for while Native Americans were being displaced.

¹⁵ Huber, Margaret. "Powhatan (d. 1618)" Encyclopedia Virginia. Virginia Humanities, December 22, 2021. <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/powhatan-d-1618/#heading2>

America's negative view of native peoples could contribute to why the story of Roanoke has become such a phenomenon. To this point, Episcopal bishop, Joseph Blount Cheshire, born in 1850 in North Carolina, had this to say about the fate of the Roanoke colony in regards to his view on the possibility of intermarriage between white colonists and a Native American tribe - "Not degrade the memory of these early pioneers in the settlement of America by supposing that they at once forgot their Christian nature, and voluntarily and promptly sunk into heathen barbarism, within less than one generation." Rhetoric such as this is why it is especially important to be fully knowledgeable of the history of Roanoke. To fully understand what happened to those involved in the first attempt at establishing an English presence in North America, one must also understand the complexities involved. Especially the tumultuous relationship the English had with the nearby Indians, as well as with Spain. Although it may never be known for certain what happened after John White left Roanoke on that fateful day in 1587, historians have not been left without evidence. Those simple letters carved into the trees, along with the instructions White left with the group, and the lack of any sign of an Indian attack at the settlement, point to the migration and survival of the Roanoke colonists.

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