



The Lost Colony

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Introduction

Sir Walter Raleigh

A brief biography of the man in charge of the expeditions to Roanoke Island

The First Colony

The story of Raleigh's first European colony on Roanoke Island

The Lost Colony

The story of Raleigh's ill-fated second colony.

The Mystery

An overview of several explanations of the Mystery of the Lost Colony

Conclusion

Introduction

The Outer Banks of North Carolina have a rich history full of pirates, Indians, explorers and even airplanes! There are countless stories and legends set there that have captivated generations of people. But one story stands out. One story has confounded the minds of historians, archaeologists, and scientists alike. This mystery has drawn hundreds of people to North Carolina's shores. It has befuddled everyone who has heard it. This is the mystery of the Lost Colony.

Sir Walter Raleigh

Sir Walter Raleigh was born in England c. 1552, the son of a country gentleman. He was fortunate enough to live during an era of great exploration and learning. Raleigh grew up to be a man of many talents. He was a knight, an explorer, a poet, and one of Queen Elizabeth I's favorite courtiers. Raleigh was known to be dashing and chivalrous. One famous legend says that he threw his cloak over a muddy spot in the road where he and the queen were walking, then invited her to walk over it.

Raleigh led a very exciting life. He searched for El Dorado¹, he was a great Elizabethan poet, he was thrown in the tower of London, and he fought in Ireland! But he was most famous as an explorer. On his first expedition to the New World², Raleigh named the entire land that he found

1 El Dorado is the fictional city of gold located somewhere in South America.

2 The New World is another name for the Americas. It is called that because it was only made known to the rest of the

“Virginia”, after the virgin queen, Elizabeth. On his second expedition in 1585, the very same year he was knighted by the queen, he sent out seven ships to start a colony in Virginia, which then included present day North Carolina. This colony was a failure.

Raleigh tried again in 1587. This third time, the colony was doomed.



Sir Walter Raleigh

The First Colony

The 1585 expedition was composed of 114 men³, with Richard Grenville as their leader.

Grenville was ordered to explore the area where they were settling, which was Roanoke Island, off the coast of present-day North Carolina, and establish a colony there. The expedition got off to a rough

world relatively recently.

3 These first colonists learned that it is very hard to start a colony without women or children there. The colonists were also not used to hard work, and that contributed a lot to the failure of the settlement.

start after their lead ship struck a shoal⁴ and much of the colony's food was lost. Things got worse when the colonists accused the native Indians of stealing a silver cup. The colonists sacked and burned the Indian village of Aquascogoc, causing bad feelings which later colonists would encounter.

The explorer, sir Francis Drake, came by Roanoke Island and picked up the men to bring them back to England. A few days later, a relief ship sent by Raleigh arrived at Roanoke Island, and, finding the island devoid of colonists, returned to England. Grenville arrived at Roanoke about two weeks later, with a fleet of three or four ships. He too searched the Island for the colony, but after talking to an Indian, concluded that the colonists had gone home. Grenville sailed back to England on August 25, 1585, leaving a holding party of 15 men on Roanoke Island. He would never see them again.

The little party faced constant Indian hostility and so it is thought that they fled the island and went to live among some friendly tribes. This explanation however, is only a theory and must not be assumed to be actual fact.

The Lost Colony

Two years later, in 1587, Raleigh sent out a second expedition to the New World. This time it headed up to the coast to Chesapeake, in present day Virginia, with the plan to stop at Roanoke Island to pick up the 15-man holding party left there. Unfortunately the captain of the ship that took this new colony to Chesapeake was dishonest. He was anxious to return to taking Spanish prizes, so he simply left the colony on Roanoke Island. The 121 stranded men, women, and children were determined to make do with what they had. They began to rebuild the colony. When they searched for the holding party, only a skeleton was found. The only local tribe that was still friendly, the Croatians, told the colonists that the men had been attacked, but nine had sailed away and survived.

⁴ Shoal: a sandbank or sandbar that makes the water shallow



The Colonists on Roanoke Island

On August 18, 1587, a girl named Virginia Dare was born on Roanoke Island. She was the first English child born in the New World. Her grandfather, John White (1540-1606) was the leader of the second group of colonists. He had sailed on Raleigh's first expedition as an artist. Many of his watercolors of the New World are famous today, and they have helped us understand much about early American colonial life.

Naturally, relations with nearly all the local Indians were less than friendly due to Richard Grenville's previous hostile actions. White sent his men and an Indian interpreter, Manteo, by water to Croatian Island. At first the Indians were slightly hostile but they soon became friendly. Unfortunately, this affection for the colonists was not shared by any of the other tribes.

George Howe, one of the colonists, had already been murdered while out searching for crabs on the beach by himself. The death of Howe was the last straw for some of the colonists, especially after John White was unable to re-establish good relations. They persuaded John White to sail back to England for help.

Crossing the Atlantic ocean so late in the year was very risky, but White agreed to do it. Before he left, the colonists agreed to carve a Maltese cross in a tree as a sign of distress in case they had to leave in haste because of the Indians.

White had barely arrived in England, when he was met by more bad news. Plans for a relief fleet were delayed because the captain of the ship did not want to go back to Roanoke Island that winter. Unfortunately, England was also at war with Spain when White arrived, so no ships could be spared except for two small vessels deemed unnecessary for the war. White seized this opportunity and set off at once for Roanoke Island.

The captains of the two small ships were very greedy. Unfortunately, this quality manifested itself on the way to Roanoke Island. The captains attempted to capture several ships, but ended up getting captured themselves! John White had to wait in England for two more years. At long last he was able to gain passage on a privateering mission that was headed for the Caribbean and planned to stop by Roanoke Island. John White arrived there on April 18, 1590, his granddaughter's third birthday.

The colony was deserted. White organized a search party, but there were no signs of struggle and no trace of the colonists could be found. Approximately 90 men, 17 women, and 11 children were missing from Roanoke Island. No one knew where they were. The only clues that White found were the word Croatian carved into one of the posts of the fort, and the letters C, R, and O carved into a nearby tree. There was no cross. The colony had disappeared without a trace.

The Mystery

What happened to the colony? No one knows for sure, although there are countless theories and legends. Some people say that the lost colonists went off to live with the Indians on Croatian Island and that there are blue eyed Indians living in that part of the country. John White had passed the island on his way to Roanoke. It appeared to be deserted as well, but he never got a chance to search it thoroughly. It was another 20 years before another Englishman set foot on Roanoke Island.

By that time, any clues left on the island had faded and Croatian Island was empty, but the legend lived on. English settlers often heard stories from the Indians who said that the colonists were killed, but there were no bodies. Rumors started that a blond haired child was living up north near Chesapeake bay, but no one knew anything for sure. There were dozens of stories about the English girl, Virginia Dare ranging from the plausible to the fantastic. One story said that she was taken captive. Another said that she married an Indian. Yet another that a witch doctor turned her into a white doe.

Others said that that a phantom ship picked the colonists up. One of the most interesting tales is the story of the “Eleanor Dare Stones”. In the late 1930's and early 1940's, a series of old stones were found in North Carolina. The stones had strange markings on them that, when observed more closely, turned out to be Old English writing. The writing told the dramatic and tragic tale of Eleanor Dare, mother of Virginia, daughter of John White, after White left the colony for England. Many intelligent people were fooled as the stones proved to be a hoax. The stones are now kept at Brenau University in Gainesville, Georgia . The Lost Colony and Virginia Dare have also played a prominent role in popular culture. Books, movies, plays and TV shows have been dedicated to this strange story.

Conclusion

The days of exploration are long gone, but the mystery of the Lost Colony lives on. Every summer on Roanoke Island, an outdoor drama about the Lost Colony is performed to keep the legend alive. It is an

out of the ordinary tale. A story that could be found in works of fiction, but it is very real. Perhaps that is why it is so intriguing. Perhaps part of the magic of the mystery is the fact that it has never been solved. And perhaps it should stay that way, forever a puzzle, captivating people and inspiring them to learn more and delve deeper into their nation's history.

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