

FREEDOM

STORIES

*Jamestown**May 14, 1607*

The Hard Lessons of Liberty

Historical Spotlight

On May 14, 1607, 104 English settlers stepped ashore on a marshy Virginia peninsula, drove a cross into the ground, knelt in prayer, and then proceeded to make nearly every mistake a free people can make.

They had come expecting gold. What they found was swamp, heat, brackish water, and a wilderness that demanded relentless work. Under the Virginia Company's communal arrangement, all food went into a shared storehouse and all labor fed the collective pool, with equal shares distributed regardless of individual contribution. The result was entirely predictable. As Captain John Smith recorded, the industrious quickly realized their extra effort benefited the idle just as much as themselves, and so they stopped making the extra effort. "Glad was he who could slip from his labour, or slumber over his task." By the first winter, disease had swept the camp and only 38 of the original 104 settlers were still alive.

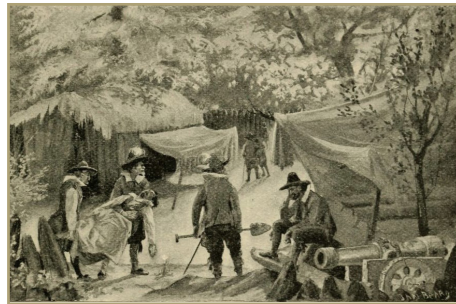
Smith took command in 1608 and imposed a rule drawn directly from the Apostle Paul: he that will not work shall not eat. It was harsh, biblical, and temporarily effective. Crops were planted, a well was dug, houses were built. But forced labor is not self-government, instead, it is just a more organized form of the same collectivism that had nearly killed the colony. When Smith was injured and returned to England in 1609, Jamestown fell into its darkest hour. The winter of 1609–1610, known simply as the

Starving Time, reduced a population of roughly 300 to just 60 survivors. Settlers ate their horses, their dogs, their boots, and in at least one documented case, each other. When Governor Thomas Dale arrived in 1611 to rebuild the shattered colony, he found the survivors idle in the streets.

Starvation had not just emptied their stomachs, the communal system had broken something in their character.

Dale's remedy was simple and transformative. Beginning in 1614, he assigned each settler three acres of private land. Each man could work it for himself, keep the fruits of his labor, and trade his surplus freely. The Virginia Company could claim only one month of labor per year, never during planting or harvest. The results were immediate. Smith reported that productivity increased at least sevenfold. John Rolfe marveled that settlers were now eagerly "gathering and reaping the fruits of their labors with much joy and comfort." Within a few years, Jamestown was not only feeding itself but exporting surplus corn to neighboring tribes.

The lesson was ancient, even if the colonists had to learn it the hard way. Throughout Scripture, God assigns stewardship to individuals and families, not anonymous collectives. Stewardship requires accountability, and accountability shapes character. In Deuteronomy, God gave Israel a land apportioned to families, with boundaries to be honored across generations. Proverbs honors the man who diligently



Sickness at Jamestown, circa 1610
Jan Beary, 1898

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Jamestown, Virtue, and the Price of Self-Government

works his own field. Paul commands that a man who will not provide for his own household has denied the faith. Private property is not a concession to greed; it is a moral structure that cultivates responsibility. Remove the connection between effort and reward, and you do not produce fairness, you produce idleness and decay.

Yet economics alone cannot explain what happened at Jamestown, and economics alone cannot sustain what was eventually built there. The colony's story began not at the James River but at Cape Henry, at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, where the

Anglican chaplain Reverend Robert Hunt led the settlers ashore to plant a cross in the sand and dedicate the land to God before a single house was built or a single acre cleared. Hunt's ministry throughout the colony's early months was one of quiet, costly faithfulness with two prayer services daily, two sermons every Sunday, communion every three months, all conducted under an old sail stretched between trees. When fire destroyed the fort in January 1608 and Hunt lost his entire library and nearly all his possessions, Captain John Smith recorded that no one ever heard him complain. He gave what he had and continued until his death that spring.

Hunt embodied the virtue the colony so desperately lacked: the willingness to serve without counting the personal cost. He pointed to a truth deeper than any economic reform. The structures of liberty matter enormously, but they cannot function without the

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people inside them. Free institutions require virtuous inhabitants who understand that freedom is a stewardship before it is a right, and that self-government of a nation begins with the self-government of the soul.

What This Means to Us



Jamestown's near-collapse and eventual survival form a compressed parable that every generation must relearn. A society that severs the link between labor and reward, between responsibility and consequence, does not become more just. It produces less of both justice and abundance.

Free people working land they own, keeping what they grow, and answering to God for how they tend what He has given them, will innovate, sacrifice, and build in ways that collectives cannot replicate. This is not merely economic theory. It is woven into the created order.

The cross planted at Cape Henry and the settlement founded at Jamestown stand together as the beginning of the great American experiment. That experiment was never guaranteed to succeed. It slowly and painfully survived, and at great cost, as the colonists discovered what Scripture had always taught. Ordered liberty, rooted in accountability, property, and the fear of God, is not a comfortable inheritance. It is a daily discipline.

Founding the First Permanent English Colony in America at James Towne, Virginia, 1607
The Dixie Book of Days,
Matthew Page Andrews, 1912