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The journey of Christopher Columbus in 1492 signaled the beginning of the greatest migration in the history of the world. The Spanish and Portuguese began the great migration with the conquest of the native peoples of Central and South America, building grand cities and extracting the vast gold and silver resources for the benefit of their countries. But it was not long before northern Europeans—the British, Dutch, French, and Scandavians—emigrated in even greater numbers. By the middle of the seventeenth century, many thousands of people had crossed the ocean from Europe and Africa to the new world, some as hopeful aspirants to a new and better life and many as coerced migrants—criminals, indentured servants, and slaves. All the migrants had to endure the long sea voyage, in which food, water, and exercise were scarce, leading to suffering, disease, and irritable tempers. Upon arrival, even the most privileged were faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles: food shortages, disease, absence of family and friends, opposition from inhabitants of the land, and sheer exhaustion. Although different groups faced widely varying conditions when they landed in the new world, all had severe adjustments to make as they began to cope with the difficulties of survival in unfamiliar and often threatening conditions.

Karen Kupperman’s tale of Jamestown, first settled by the English in 1607, is one of the many stories of the great migration. As inhabitants of the first English settlement to survive on a permanent basis, the migrants to Jamestown had only the Spanish model to emulate, and it soon became apparent that it would not work in the northern hemisphere. There were no gold and silver mines to be exploited and no large populations of Indians to enslave. Lacking these clearly visible sources of potential wealth, financial backers in England had less interest in supporting the attempts of the colonists to stabilize the settlement. Nearby Indians, although at first curious and supportive with gifts of food and advice, were soon alienated by the demanding arrogance of the English and became an ominous and threatening presence. For its first two decades, Jamestown led a tenuous existence as it struggled to survive.

Historians have long striven to comprehend the near disaster at Jamestown, postulating the disease-prone climate, the laziness and greed of the colonists, the
exploitation of indentured servants by the wealthy, or the lack of economic incentives such as private property as possible culprits. Kupperman here explores another approach to the problems encountered by early Jamestown migrants. Using documents written at the time by the participants in the settlement effort, particularly those of the irascible and ubiquitous John Smith, she suggests another explanation, one that does not supplant other theories but enriches them by making use of some modern comparisons. What we have learned in the twentieth century suggests that the psychological aspects of such dramatic changes in both the physical and social environment must be taken into account in order to explain the human suffering and callousness toward others apparent in Jamestown.

Life in Jamestown colony was miserable. By the spring of 1610, three years after the venture’s founding, the colonists were desperate, starving, and sick. When reinforcements began to arrive at the end of May and the beginning of June, they found the settlers looking like skeletons and “crying out, ‘we are starved, we are starved.’” The newcomers “read a lecture of misery in our people’s faces.” Of the 500 colonists left there the previous summer, only sixty remained alive. Many had died of dysentery, what the colonists called the “bloody flux,” and “burning fevers.” Starvation had driven the men to unheard-of extremes. First they consumed their horses, then they “were glad to make shift with vermin as dogs, cats, rats, and mice.” When those were gone, the colonists ate their shoes and boots. Finally they began to do things even they described as “incredible.” They dug up corpses and ate them, “and some have licked up the blood which hath fallen from their weak fellows.” One colonist became addicted to the taste of human flesh and, when he could not be restrained, was executed for it. The “most lamentable” act was committed by a man so desperate that he killed his pregnant wife, threw the unborn child into the river, and chopped up the mother and salted the meat. His crime was not discovered until he had actually eaten some of his cache. The governor quickly had him executed.

Another man, Hugh Pryce, committed an equally distressing act. Pryce, “in a furious distracted mood, came openly into the marketplace Blaspheming, exclaiming and crying out that there was no God” because he thought God would not allow his creatures to suffer so much. When Pryce and a companion ventured into the woods and were killed by Indians, his body was ravaged and disfigured by wolves, but his dead friend was undisturbed. The colonists knew his fate was the judgment of the God he had denied, a punishment delivered as swiftly and surely as the governor’s sentence on the cannibals.

Not only did some commit unspeakable crimes, but among the rest there seemed to be no group spirit or sense of mutual respect, none of the “constancy and resolution” leaders expected. Colonists who were able to get into boats tried to sail away to England. Some “unhallowed creatures” actually brought further misery on their “desolate brethren.” When sent to trade for corn with the Indians, they disobeyed orders by mistreating the natives whose help the colonists so desperately needed. Then, as soon as their ship was loaded with corn, they conceived the “barbarous project” of deserting Virginia and returning to England. Thus the natives against it. To spread slanders abo

Colonist Gabriel the summer of 1609. He and his companions forced to live on with on alms like beggars could not possibly have. Instead, they were afforded a “starving time” when famine had prevailed. Famine had prevailed even after the lesser people spread blame track. The core of the reason was in the colony’s population although there be I dance in their season beasts so wild, and the reason.

Because of their almost totally reliable “the Savages n Algonquians, most colonists called “the Indians” were so marvel to the English, although they were content to lead their own lives. We could convince the Indians of the items that could be traded. But as the colonists grew w food supplies dram and farther around induced to provide. When Indians were which only made n
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to England. Thus they robbed the settlement of needed corn and turned the natives against it. Then, in order to justify themselves, these "scum of men" spread slanders about the colony back in England.

Colonist Gabriel Archer had warned of the danger almost a year earlier in the summer of 1609, when he returned to Jamestown from a trip to England. He and his companions found the settlers "in such distress" that they were forced to live on what the Indians provided (Archer described them as living on alms like beggars), for an ounce of copper per day. He wrote that the Indians could not possibly have provided more than they did. He blamed earlier visitors who had overpraised the country, describing it as a lush paradise; as a result, backers in England had not seen the need to send sufficient supplies. August, when Archer wrote, should have been a time of plenty when colonists could live off abundant supplies of nuts and berries, game animals, and fish. Instead, they were already in want, and their distress of summer soon turned into the famine of winter. Gabriel Archer would be among the dead of that "starving time" when the winter's toll was counted.

Famine had plagued the colony from the beginning, and it would continue even after the lessons of that terrible winter. Everyone had ideas, and many people spread blame, but no plan seemed able to get the colonists on the right track. The core problem was clear: the colonists were not producing food for themselves. Not only did they not plant and harvest crops, they did not even seem to be able to get food by hunting and fishing. Captain John Smith, who was in the colony from the beginning, wrote of this strange inability: "Now although there be Deer in the woods, Fish in the rivers, and Fowls in abundance in their seasons; yet the woods are so wide, the rivers so broad, and the beasts so wild, and we so unskilful to catch them, we little troubled them nor they us."

Because of their own inability to raise or catch food, the colonists were almost totally reliant on the Indians for sustenance. As the colonists admitted, "had the Savages not fed us, we directly had starved." The Chesapeake-area Algonquians, most of whom owed allegiance to Wahunsonacock, the man the colonists called "the great emperor Powhatan" after the name of his tribe, did have a sophisticated system of food production and storage. Their corn crop, yielding much more food per acre than European farmers could produce, was a marvel to the English. In Jamestown's early days, the Powhatans and their allies were happy to trade food for European manufactured goods that enhanced their own lives. Metal axes and knives, copper cooking pots, and, when they could convince the English to hand them over, muskets were all desirable trade items that could be efficiently integrated into Indian lifestyles.

But as the colony grew and the demands of the settlers became more pressing, Indians grew weary of this continuing reliance, which depleted their own food supplies dramatically. Boats from Jamestown were forced to travel farther and farther around Chesapeake Bay seeking Indians who still might be induced to provide food, and the value of the trade goods became debased. When Indians were reluctant to trade, colonists applied force and threats, which only made matters worse in the long run. Soon a virtual state of war
existed, and it became too dangerous to go out to cultivate crops or to hunt because of the fear of snipers who could pick off unwary men without ever even being seen. Thus the crisis of hunger and disease was intensified, and the colonists felt like prisoners in their fort.

The English-reading public avidly consumed reports that portrayed the Spanish as ruthless in their treatment of the hapless natives in Latin America, and supporters of English colonization contrasted their peaceful, benevolent intentions with reports of Spanish pillaging. Smith played on that comparison when he dramatically described his own efforts to find Indians willing to trade food for the goods he had to offer: “The Spaniard never more greedily desired gold than he victuallers’ constant Michael Sicklemo: Colonist George P. scorn” and signaled to seek for bread of a Spaniard had read of a Spaniard pouring down his self with gold.” Then he sought for gold as

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Chapter 2  The Starving Time at Jamestown

gold than he victual.” This image was reinforced when Indians, fed up with the colonists’ constant pressure, killed a small party of men led by Lieutenant Michael Sicklemore and left the corpses with bread stuffed in their mouths. Colonist George Percy wrote that the Indians thus showed their “contempt and scorn” and signaled “that others might expect the like when they should come to seek for bread and relief amongst them.” Percy was reminded of a story he had read of a Spanish general in Chile, who was killed by having molten gold poured down his throat by outraged Indians, who said to him “now glut thyself with gold.” That general (Percy thought his name was Baldivia) had “there sought for gold as Sicklemore did here for food.”

So, the Jamestown colonists had come dangerously close to emulating the example of the despised Spaniards in their dependence on native sources of food. And even by using force and threats, they could not possibly get enough food to keep the colony in health. This brings us back to the main issue: Why did they not take the steps necessary to provide their own food? Everyone who looked at the problem came up with the same disturbing answer: the colonists were lazy and impossible to motivate.

But reports from all kinds of sources agreed that this was not just ordinary laziness; something far more disturbing was at work, a “most strange condition” that no one had seen before. Ralph Hamor later wrote that the colonists, “no more sensible than beasts, would rather starve in idleness (witness their former proceedings) than feast in labor.” Colony Secretary William Strachey judged that the suffering at Jamestown was brought on by the settlers’ “sloth, riot, and vanity.” He described them tearing up their houses for firewood rather than walking a short distance into the woods. Sir Thomas Gates offered an “incredible example” of laziness. He watched colonists eat fish raw “rather than they would go a stone’s cast to fetch wood” with which to cook it. Captain John Smith wrote persuasively about Jamestown after his return to England. He described the atmosphere of “malice, grudging and muttering” in which the colonists lived. “As at this time were most of our chiefest men either sick or discontented, the rest being in such despair, as they would rather starve and rot with idleness, then be persuaded to do anything for their own relief without constraint.”

Even more astonishingly, the colonists did not learn from past suffering. After the starving winter of 1609–1610, they took no steps to plan for the future. Gates wrote that although sturgeon were plentiful in season, the men made no attempt to preserve any fish for later use. Even more incredible was Gates’s report that they allowed all fourteen fishing nets to rot so “all help of fishing perished.” When interim governor Sir Thomas Dale arrived in May 1611, a full year after the revelation of the colonists’ terrible plight, he found that they, “though I sorrow to speak it, were not so provident, though once before bitten with hunger and penury, as to put corn into the ground for their winter’s bread.” Instead, he found the men “at their daily and usual works, bowling in the streets.”

How was this possible? How could starving men spend their time bowling rather than working to produce the food they needed so desperately? Many observers in England feared that Jamestown’s experience revealed the
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degeneration of the nation. Preacher William Crashaw argued that it showed
"the pusillanimity, the baseness, the tenderness and effeminateness of our
English people, into which our nation is now degenerate, from a strong, val-
lant, hardy, patient and enduring people, as our forefathers were."
Jamestown's experience was a product of "our idleness, laziness and lascivi-
ousness." Crashaw concluded that the English had become "milksops."

Others argued that these reports did not reflect on English society as a
whole, because only the poorest-quality people had been sent to America. It
became common to sum up the experience as preacher Patrick Copland did in
1622: "(most of them at the first, being the very scum of the land, and great pity
it was that no better at that time could be had) they neglected God's worship,
lived in idleness, plotted conspiracies, resisted the government of Superiors,
and carried themselves disolutely among the heathens." The epithet "scum"
was repeated over and over again. Strachey wrote that the worst of them scarcely seemed human, and he blamed disorders on the “infected minds” sent to Virginia. Ralph Hamor urged sponsors in England to “deter all lazy, impotent, and illivers from addressing themselves thither” or the colony would not survive. Smith argued along the same lines: “one hundred good labourers [would have been] better than a thousand such Gallants as were sent me, that could do nothing but complain, curse, and despair, when they saw our miseries, and all things so clean contrary to the report in England.” He wrote that “most of them would rather starve than work.”

Everyone involved in trying to figure out what had gone wrong assumed there was some defect in the people who were being sent to Virginia. Although it is difficult to know the backgrounds of most colonists for certain, they seem to have divided into roughly three groups. One was the ordinary men, the laborers. Another segment was the skilled men, who were supposed to help the colonists get settled and to produce luxury goods to enrich backers at home. Finally, a very large percentage of the population was gentlemen and their servants. We now know that this was a very poor combination.

It was tempting to blame the laborers, and they were often dismissed as scum because they were from the lower classes in society. Cities sometimes round up people from the streets, the “swarming” poor, and shipped them off to Virginia. Poor children, some as young as eight, were shipped out by the city of London in batches of 100. Not only were all these looked down upon, but they were city-bred for the most part and had little knowledge of how one would go about setting up a farm even in England, much less in America. Nobody seemed to care very much what happened to them, although some leaders like Smith appreciated their labor.

The skilled men, who might have provided some leadership, actually created more trouble than profit in the infant society. The Virginia Company in London, made up of investors who bought shares in the expectation of getting a percentage of the profits, based its strategy on glowing propaganda reports that promised rich products from America. The skilled workers were sent at company expense to find and develop these products for the investors, but the work they were supposed to do was ridiculous in a rough settlement. Smith complained that the company cared more about the expected profits than about setting up a truly functional society. The investors had no clear idea of what it would take to get people housed and fed, much less to send home luxury goods. He blamed them for “sending us so many Refiners, Gold-smiths, Jewellers, Lapidaries, Stone-cutters, Tobacco-pipe-makers, Embroiderers, Perfumers, Silkmen” and all their attendants. When gold and jewels were not found and silk could not be produced, the specialists could not be ordered to do other work. Smith wrote that when the colonists thought of the Virginia Company planners at home, they wondered “how it was possible such wise men could so torment themselves and us with such strange absurdities and impossibilities” as the idea that Virginia would be sending home jewels and perfumes right from the beginning. In 1609, two years after the founding, Smith wrote that the skilled workers still included only one experienced carpenter and two blacksmiths.
The worst mistake of all was the English backers’ assumption that a person born to high social rank automatically knew how to lead. The investors were mostly gentlemen and aristocrats, and in England high birth meant a great deal. Therefore, the London Virginia Company sent a very large number of gentlemen—about one-third of the total—in the early shipments to Jamestown. These people had no expectation of doing productive work; in fact, they expected to be waited on by servants. Smith complained that even the colonists who were supposed to be workers were mostly footmen and other attendants for the gentlemen “that never did know what a day’s work was.” Looking back later, even those who supported the company acknowledged it was foolish “to have more to wait and play than work, or more commanders and officers than industrious laborers.”

Some gentlemen apparently went because it was an exciting prospect, a lark, and they had no intention of staying. Others went because they lacked other good choices, or because they were escaping debts and problems at home. As Smith wrote, there were “many unruly gallants packed thither by their friends to escape ill destinies” at home. George Percy, for example, was the younger brother of the earl of Northumberland. Like many younger sons, he grew up in the luxury and privilege of a noble house, but then, because under the law the oldest son inherited everything, he became a plain gentleman who had to make his own way. George’s oldest brother, the earl, was imprisoned in the Tower of London because he was suspected in the Popish Plot of 1605, a Roman Catholic conspiracy that had planned to bomb the Houses of Parliament and King James. The entire Percy family suffered from the taint of suspicion, and George, who was always sickly, apparently went to Virginia in 1607 as a good way to escape royal wrath and make a career for himself.

Another inheritance-poor younger brother among the first group of colonists was Captain John Martin, a quarrelsome and contentious figure in Virginia, third son of the Lord Mayor of London; his father was also master of the royal mint. Martin was older than most of the early settlers, forty-five in 1607, and he was “sick and weak” most of the time. He had commanded a ship under Sir Francis Drake twenty years earlier and may have expected to have a greater voice in running things than he did. Another troublesome early leader in Jamestown was a man named John Sicklemore, who sometimes called himself Captain John Ratcliffe. For whatever reason, he disguised his identity so well that even today his origins cannot be traced. One of the original council members was George Kendall, a man who apparently was connected to important families but who, like the younger sons who chose emigration, had been denied an inheritance. He was thrown off the council and later executed, apparently because the other councillors thought he was spying for the Spanish. These men were not prepared to share the burdens of government and work together; each seems to have been seeking advancement for himself that he was denied in England.

Most of the gentlemen in Virginia had no special training for the challenges of confronting people from very different cultures and attempting to recreate English society in a new setting. Edward Maria Wingfield, the first governor at Jamestown, had been a soldier in Ireland and the Netherlands, but he had no talent for getting the interest in building re. Other gentlemen Gabriel Archer, for ex- law school, and he hi New England in 1602 the leading Virginia have thought the men shortly after their arriage, had also been London’s literary cir- way. As the investors education did not nec- presented. Leaders in while the settlement was not suitable, grow many become so careless, tr row, and others to mu:

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talent for getting the men working together toward common goals and no
interest in building relationships with the American natives. The rank-and-file
colonists suspected that he and his cronies were eating well on secret stores of
beef, wine, and eggs, while the colonists were restricted to small amounts of
wheat and barley that “contained as many worms as grains.” Some thought he
was planning to escape secretly with the colony’s supplies. When Wingfield
was forced out, John Ratcliffe aka Sicklemore became governor.

Other gentleman-colonists were even less well suited by experience. Gabriel
Archer, for example, was educated at Cambridge and in Gray’s Inn, a
law school, and he had participated, along with John Martin, in a voyage to
New England in 1602. The New England venture had been led by another of
the leading Virginia colonists, Bartholomew Gosnold, so the investors may
have thought the men could work well together. Unfortunately, Gosnold died
shortly after their arrival in Jamestown. William Strachey, another of the
genlemen, had also been educated at Cambridge and Gray’s Inn and was active
in London’s literary circles when the chance for a Virginia adventure came his
way. As the investors learned painfully, high social rank and good academic
education did not necessarily prepare Englishmen for the challenges America
presented. Leaders in the colony advised against sending too many gentlemen
while the settlement was still rough because they, “when they find things not
suitable, grow many times so discontented, they forget themselves, and oft
become so careless, that a discontented melancholy brings them to much sor-
row, and others to much misery.”

Very few in any of the three groups—the ordinary laborers, the skilled
workers, or the gentlemen—were prepared either by experience or psychologi-
cally for the isolated and trying life in Virginia. Smith’s report, especially his
reference to despair, offers a clue to what was going on. Life in Jamestown was
psychologically debilitating, and the planters were apparently falling victim to
depression. Many reports mention despair or use terms such as Hamor’s
“Infected minds.” One newcomer described the colonists as “distracted and
forlorn.” As George Thorpe later wrote, “more do die here of the disease of
their mind than of their body.” George Donne, son of the poet John Donne,
summed up the Jamestown experience: “He is wretched that believes himself
wretched.”

Captain John Smith believed he knew what needed to be done. John Smith
was unique among the first contingent of settlers. He alone of all the men cho-
sen for the original governing council by the Virginia Company was selected
for his knowledge and experience rather than his social status. He was of yeo-
man background rather than from the gentry. Smith, bored with his appren-
ticeship to a merchant, had gone as a teenager to fight in the religious wars
between Catholics and Protestants in France. He returned to England but was
soon back in continental Europe. This time he went out to the eastern frontier
in Austria and Hungary, where European armies resisted Turkish forces push-
ing toward Vienna. Smith wrote an account of this war, highlighting his own
exploits. Nonetheless, he was taken prisoner and was for a time a slave in
Turkey. He killed his captor and escaped, traveling through much of Europe
and even into North Africa before he made it back to England. He was in his mid-twenties, and the Virginia Company was seeking likely people to found the Jamestown colony. Smith was just what they were looking for.

In Virginia he constantly pointed out the deficiencies of the other council members, despite their high birth. They sneered at him as an upstart and tried to freeze him out of the government. During the colony’s first year, Smith was away from Jamestown much of the time, leading a small band that explored

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Chesapeake Bay and traded for food supplies for the colony. He was captured by Powhatan’s forces and spent several weeks in captivity. During this time he and Powhatan laid the foundation for a relationship of mutual respect and wariness that bore fruit when Smith finally became governor in September 1608 after all the high-born council members were either dead or too weak to object.

The first winter, during which the frustrated Smith had chafed under what he saw as the mismanagement of those in charge, the population of the colony fell from the original 108 to “about eight and thirty miserable poor and sick creatures.” But, as he constantly reiterated in his many books, there was no despair and few deaths during the second winter while he ran the colony.

Along with others, he believed that part of Jamestown’s problem was structural: the colony lacked sufficiently good housing and clean water, for example. Reverend Alexander Whitaker wrote that people died from “their own filthiness” but also because of “want of comforts for sick men.” George Percy, in describing famine as the main cause of death, also spoke of the “slime and filth” as well as the salty flavor in the river water they drank.

Smith set out to correct these problems, and he wrote vividly of what the men accomplished under his direction: “Jamestown being burned, we rebuilt it and three Forts more. Besides the Church and Storehouse, we had about forty or fifty several houses to keep us warm and dry, environed with a palizado of fourteen or fifteen feet. . . . We dug a fair well of fresh water in the Fort . . . [and] planted one hundred acres of Corn.” He also sent parties of colonists farther up the James River and down to its mouth to live off the land and to learn survival techniques from the Indians.

Moreover, he got all the men in Jamestown up and working and thereby cured their apathy and despair. He decreed that the able-bodied must care for the sick and provide food for them. He gathered the colonists together and said, quoting 2 Thessalonians 3:10 in the Bible, “you must obey this for a law, that he that will not work shall not eat.” He warned the “drones” not to hope for relief from the Indians, and unlike previous leaders who had considered themselves too important to do manual labor, he set his own labor as the standard: “every one that gathereth not every day as much as I do, the next day shall be sent beyond the river, and for ever be banished from the fort, and live there or starve.” In Jamestown under Smith’s control, even the gentlemen worked, “making it their delight to hear the trees thunder as they fell.” Because their “tender fingers” became so blistered and raw, the gentlemen swore with every stroke of their axes, so Smith decreed that at night a mug of cold water would be poured down each man’s sleeve for every oath he uttered that day, and swearing was eliminated.

Smith’s proof lay in the result: “This order many murmured, was very cruel, but it caused the most part so well bestir themselves, that of 200 men (except they were drowned) there died not past 7 or 8.” That was quite a contrast to the death toll of the preceding winter (1607–1608), in which the population dropped from 108 to 38. But Jamestown’s misery was not finished. Smith was eased out of the colony by his enemies and sent home in 1609. The worst
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starving time, in which the population fell from about 500 to 60, came during that next winter, 1609–1610. As Smith put it, "Idleness and carelessness brought all I did in three years in six months to nothing."

After that second starving time, reports from the colony were avidly read and analyzed. Jamestown required massive investment to keep it going, and company leaders in London knew that no one would put money into a losing proposition. As John Smith wrote, "the common question is, For all those miseries, where is the wealth they have got, or the Gold or Silver Mines?" Company leaders had to find a solution to Jamestown's problems or give up the venture. Many explanations were suggested by those who wanted to find some hope for the future.

One line of thought suggested that God was testing the English and that therefore to give up would be sacrilege. Writers pointed out that God seemed to intervene on the settlers' behalf just at the point where conditions became unbearable: "Almighty God that had thus far tried the patience of the English, would not suffer them to be tempted above that they were able." When Indians did bring the colonists food, the credit was given to God for moving their hearts to pity. Suffering was also interpreted as "God's rod of mortality," punishing the colonists for their sins. John Rolfe, who earned a place in history through his marriage to Pocahontas, the daughter of Powhatan, wrote in 1616 that God's blessing, though delayed, was now pouring on Virginia. The English, he wrote, in terms usually reserved for the Jews, are "a peculiar [special] people marked and chosen by the finger of God to possess it." Rolfe called those who continued to criticize the venture "incredulous worldlings," and others argued that such critics were persecutors of Christ. Promoters such as William Strachey argued that Virginia should be seen as "a Sanctum Sanctorum, an holy house." England could not just walk away as from an ordinary business venture.

Many observers argued that Jamestown's problems had stemmed mostly from sickness, and they began to analyze the specifics of how immigrants became sick. Those with experience asserted that the ships arrived at the wrong time of year. They came in the early summer, and so "unseasoned" English bodies were confronted by the hot sun of Virginia, to which they were unaccustomed, and a new disease environment all at once. Some reasoned that Jamestown's location, chosen for defensibility, was unhealthy and swampy. Beer was the normal drink for all ages and sexes in England, and many remarked that newcomers were sickened by the switch to drinking water in America. Sir Thomas Gates linked the location and its water, saying that the principal thing that "weakened and endangered" his men was "drinking of the brackish water of James Fort." Some wrote that eating fresh meat when they were more used to salted or dried meat made the newcomers sick.

But many also thought there was a strong psychological component in the way disease struck and that idleness and despair played a role. Whereas Smith ridiculed the "tufftufaory humorists" who pined for their featherbeds and taverns, others argued that the gap between expectation and reality was too great for many, who were sickened "by having this country victuals over-praised
unto them in England and by not knowing they shall drink water here.” Some planters wrote that disease came “either by contagion of sickness or by the mother and cause thereof, ill example of idleness.” Ralph Hamor agreed that idleness caused disease and that “few idlers” had escaped “the scurvy disease, with which few, or none once infected, have recovered.” Most colonists arrived with scurvy, the result of a lack of vitamin C, because they had no fresh fruit or vegetables on the long sea voyage. The lethargy produced by scurvy in its early stages was seen as simple laziness, and leaders who saw the disease worsen then concluded that the laziness had caused the disease. Thus, disease grew out of a mental or moral weakness in their interpretation.

If they were to save the venture, like it or not, investors had to pay attention to Captain John Smith and his books explaining what had gone wrong in Virginia. The Virginia Company had no intention of sending Smith back to the colony. His habit of correcting, even ridiculing, his social betters made him unpopular with investors and, they thought, untrustworthy. But they did pay attention to his results.

Many analysts argued that the basic problem in Jamestown was inadequate government. The original plan for the colony had been to send a council appointed in England and to have the council choose the governor. Smith asserted that he was able to be effective only when the other councillors were too sick to interfere, and the Virginia Company accepted the notion that the original government plan had spread authority over too many men. As John Rolfe wrote of the council in 1616, “All would be Keisars [Caesars], none inferior to other . . . and in this government happened all the misery. Afterward a more absolute government was granted Monarchally, wherein it still continueth.” When the authority was weak, the colonists degenerated, according to another analysis, into a “headless and unbridled multitude.” Sir Thomas Gates, who had arrived to find the scene of desolation in May of 1610, wrote that he had, as an “experiment,” instituted a system of strong authority rather like Smith’s, and “in a fortnights space [two weeks] he recovered the health of most of them by moderate labor, whose sickness was bred in them by intemperate idleness.” His experiment confirmed the conclusion.

So the solution seemed pretty simple: just replicate the order and discipline created by Smith and get all the colonists working again. Purposeful activity would both solve the infrastructure problems and pull the colonists out of depression. Sir Thomas Dale, the governor who arrived to find the colonists bowling in the streets, landed in May 1611 with a set of extremely harsh laws designed to force the colonists to behave responsibly. Unlike the earlier gentlemen, Gates and Dale both had life experience that seemed to suit them to take command of the idle young men in Virginia. Both had been in what some called the “university of war.” The two men had served on the Protestant side in the Netherlands, where the Dutch were fighting to free themselves of domination by Catholic Spain, and both had fought against rebels in Ireland. Moreover, Dale’s background was similar to Smith’s; he, too, had begun as a common soldier and had risen through the ranks to a captaincy. But Dale did not have Smith’s talent for creating a sense of common purpose and shared responsibility. Rather, command. Bowling in military discipline. Every Moral and Martial, w’th beat, go to meals and sleep on orders. Extrem. The laws were co: wrote home against th’ which they suffered. T...
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The accompanying
legend says that they are eating boiled corn, and in the foreground the artist has
illustrated some of the variety of foods available in America. (Theodor De Bry
engraving after John White’s painting, published in De Bry edition of Hariot’s
BRIEF AND TRUE REPORT OF THE NEWFOUND LAND OF VIRGINIA
(1590), Grand Voyages, Pt. I.—John Carter Brown Library at Brown University)

responsibility. Rather, Dale set out to treat the colonists as soldiers under his
command. Bowling in the streets was replaced with a regimented day based on
military discipline. Every part of life was regulated under the “Laws Divine,
Moral and Martial,” which stipulated that colonists were to wake up at a drum-
beat, go to meals and to work together by the sound of the drum, and go to
sleep on orders. Extreme punishments were laid out for even minor infractions.
The laws were controversial even at the time. The planters in the colony
wrote home against the “Book of most tyrannical laws written in blood” under
which they suffered. They wrote that they

remained in great want and misery under most severe and Cruel laws sent
over in print, and contrary to the express Letter of the King in his most gracious
Charter, and as mercilessly executed, often times without trial or judgment.
The allowance in those times for a man was only eight ounces of meal and half
a pint of peas for a day, the one and the other moldy, rotten, full of cobwebs
and maggots, loathsome to man and not fit for beasts, which forced many to
flee for relief to the Savage Enemy, who being taken again were put to sundry
deaths as by hanging, shooting and breaking upon the wheel and others were
forced by famine to fish for their bellies, of whom one for stealing 2 or 3 pints of oatmeal had a bodkin [dagger] thrust though his tongue and was tied with a chain to a tree until he starved. If a man through his sickness had not been able to work, he had no allowance at all, and so consequently perished many through these extremities, being weary of life dug holes in the earth and hid themselves till they famished.

Those who opposed the system could justly point out that the colony held on but did not prosper as long as the martial law administration held.

But the regime also had many defenders. Ralph Hamor wrote that without the severity of these laws, “I see not how the utter subversion and ruin of the Colony should have been prevented.” He acknowledged that Dale did carry out severe punishments forbidden in England, especially in executions, where “the manner of their death may some object, hath been cruel, unusual and barbarous, which indeed they have not been, witness France, and other countries for less offences. What if they have been more severe than usual in England, there was just cause for it.” And, building on the assumption that the colonists in Jamestown were “scum,” he went on to argue that special treatment was necessary to get their attention: “It being true that amongst those people (who for the most part are sensible only of the body’s torment) the fear of a cruel, painful and unusual death more restrains them than death itself.” The Virginia Company justified their departure from English law, saying martial law was necessary because of the “debased and irregular persons” in the colony. The results were convincing enough for investors, who believed that Sir Thomas Dale had reclaimed “almost miraculously those idle and disordered people and reduced them to labor and an honest fashion of life.” But even if the martial law regime held the little outpost together, there was no sign that the settlement was preparing to transform itself into a true colony with planters committed to making whole new lives in Virginia. That transition would require yet a further transformation in the plan.

The planters who survived this period argued that Virginia’s problems were not caused by their deficiencies, and they rejected the label “scum.” The selfishness and lack of care had been in London, not in Virginia: “the cause of our factions was bred here in England.” As Captain John Smith wrote at the end of his life, the Virginia Company had made “Religion their color, when all their aim was nothing but present profit.” The settlers blamed the company leaders for sending ship after ship with too few and too poor quality supplies, with the result that the food they were able to procure was eaten up by newcomers. Dale arrived, they wrote, with food so rotten the hogs refused to eat it. They argued that their working time was spent in a fruitless search for gold to line the pockets of investors or in saving boards to send home. The company, they said, had threatened simply to forget about their existence and abandon them in America as “banished men” if they did not shape up and start sending home valuable products. They said they were held in a kind of slavery during which they underwent “as hard and servile labor as the basest fellow that was brought out of Newgate” prison. And they were held as virtual prisoners. Their letters home were intercepted and read in London, and any who wrote the
tried and convicted of crimes and were punished. None of them was allowed to go home themselves. They scorned the pitiful structures created during that time and wrote that “neither could a blessing from God be hoped for in those buildings which were founded upon the blood of so many Christians.”

The colonists were right. No firm foundations were built under the martial law. That regime may have looked on paper like the system instituted by John Smith, but the results were far different. So, the problem remained: Could planners and planters figure out how to create a brand-new society in a distant land in which English men and women could thrive and flourish? Actually, although Virginia continued to look like a mess, and the death rate remained high, particularly for newcomers, the colony was slowly, imperceptibly at first, moving in the right direction as the decade of the 1610s moved on.

Ironically the answer lay not in stricter control but in relinquishing authority to the people who knew what needed to be done, the planters themselves. It should have been obvious how useless it was to expect colonists to work hard to enrich the investors back in London when they stood to gain nothing from that hard work themselves. Instead of holding all the land in company hands, the investors began to divide it up. Big investors could acquire a large estate to develop as they saw fit, but they could have land only if they imported settlers to develop it and gave them the support they needed. Even more important, all immigrants, no matter how humble, were guaranteed land of their own as soon as they had paid off the cost of their passage over by working for the person who imported them. Now people had the incentive to work, and they also had control over what and how they planted. John Rolfe had developed a good marketable strain of tobacco that would sell well in England, and tobacco culture took off in the colony, giving planters a product that they knew they could grow and that consumers would buy. Tobacco production went up dramatically year by year, from 2000 pounds in 1615 to 40,000 pounds five years later. And the upward curve continued so that by 1629, 1,500,000 pounds were sent home. Tobacco, which had been a luxury product for the very rich, became accessible to all in the new craze for “drinking” smoke in England.

Investors also realized that something approaching normal English life was necessary for the colony to move beyond the grim military life of the fort. They took steps to encourage immigration by women, realizing that women were absolutely essential if the colony was to become a true society. As long as normal family life was absent, colonists would not think of themselves as permanent immigrants. The grant of land was meaningful only when farmers had wives and children to provide for. The Virginia Assembly’s first meeting in 1619 transmitted this demand: “In a new plantation, it is not known whether man or woman be more necessary.” And the investors understood that this lack of normal life had been a big factor in the strange despair in Jamestown. “By long experience we have found that the Minds of our people in Virginia are much dejected, and their hearts enflamed with a desire to return for England only through the wants of the comforts without which God saw that Man could not live contentedly, no not in Paradise.” They now saw that they could not “tie and root the Planters’ minds to Virginia” without “the bonds of wives and children.”
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to hire him and instead just followed the advice in his books. But he was pleased to see the family-centered colonies growing up in New England. He died in 1631, just after Massachusetts Bay began, and he endorsed the Puritans' scheme in his last book, *Advertisements for the Unexperienced Planters of New England, or Any Where*. He advised the Massachusetts Bay company “not to stand too much upon the letting, setting, or selling those wild Countries, nor impose too much upon the commonalty . . . for present gain.” The way to make the colony a success was to get the colonists committed to it by giving immigrants land for “him and his heirs for ever,” and he warned that people would emigrate from England only if they knew they would be better off in the colonies, where, he predicted, “the very name of servitude will breed much ill blood, and become odious to God and man.”

Although Smith did not realize it, nor did anyone else at the time, Virginia was moving in the same direction as New England by this time. Although the death rate remained high for newcomers, the colony had begun to settle into a pattern of strong immigration, widespread landowning, and local control by elite planters. The successful pattern had strong elements of similarity in both regions. Smith outlined the attraction of America: “here are not hard Landlords to rack us with high rents, or extorting fines, nor tedious pleas in Law to consume us with their many years’ disputation for Justice . . . so freely hath God and his Majesty bestowed those blessings on them will attempt to obtain them, as here every man may be master of his own labor and land . . . and if he have nothing but his hands, he may set up his Trade, and by industry quickly grow rich.” These riches were to come not from gold and pearls, as the Virginia Company had sought in vain, but from products raised by English men and women—tobacco in Virginia and fish in New England.

There was a further, and tragic, similarity in the Virginia and New England experiences. In both regions the access to land ownership that made immigration worthwhile for increasing numbers of English men and women created intolerable conditions for the natives. The transition to land ownership and large-scale growth was marked by a major Indian war in both New England and Virginia—the great Powhatan uprising of 1622 in Virginia was followed by ten years of devastating warfare, and the Pequot War in 1636 crippled the leading force in southern New England. Natives in both areas found their traditional ways of life made impossible by European-style farming and the animals—pigs, cows, horses, and chickens—that accompanied it. The great spur to success for the English spelled doom for the natives’ way of life.

**AN INTERPRETATION**

As modern observers have analyzed the reports from Jamestown, diagnoses of the colonists’ strange apathy in the early years have moved on several parallel tracks. The men were clearly malnourished. Most probably arrived with scurvy, vitamin C deficiency, from the long ocean voyage. On top of that, a diet consisting largely of corn would have produced pellagra, because corn lacks available
niacin. Pellagra’s symptoms become more pronounced in warm weather. This disease was common in the American South until supplements were added to cornmeal after World War II, so its symptoms are well known. Victims of these nutritional deficiency diseases look pale and thin, and they develop anorexia, unwillingness to eat. They also become apathetic, exhibiting the despair that so many observers in Jamestown described. As the scurvy and pellagra worsen, the sufferer develops leg cramps and pains in the joints and may have difficulty controlling arms and legs; thus victims may lie down and refuse to get up. Since the first stages of the disease are difficult to diagnose, the symptoms would have appeared to be simple laziness. Then, when the victims became worse, it was easy to conclude that they had brought the entire thing on themselves through their laziness.

Another hypothesis about the debilitation of the Jamestown settlers has to do with the slimy, brackish water they drank. Denying that famine was the principal cause of death, geographer Carville V. Earle has analyzed the flow of water in the James River and concluded that Jamestown was located just at the area where salt ocean water flowed into the fresh river water with each flood tide, creating a circulating pool of mixed water when the flow of fresh water was low. Thus in the spring, when runoff and rainfall would make the river flow strong, the water was relatively clean, and the salt ocean water was swept back out to sea. As the summer wore on and the river became low, the salt water would pool up, and stagnant water became breeding grounds for germs. At that season the colonists drank dangerously contaminated water, the “brackish water” that Sir Thomas Gates indicted. The bloody flux and burning fevers that killed so many were probably infectious dysentery and typhoid fever, according to Earle, and the organisms that caused them would have come from the colonists’ own wastes. The settlers also suffered from salt poisoning, whose symptoms are swelling, lassitude (the colonists’ laziness), and irritability. Thus when Smith and later governors dispersed the settlers to live off the land at other points along the river, they were saving lives by placing settlers in healthier locations. The natives had evolved a way of life that took them away from the river during the summer, and the colonists needed to learn from them.

Both hypotheses—that Jamestown’s residents were malnourished and that they were caught in a poisoned environment—certainly contribute part of the answer as to why the colonists appeared to fall into patterns of fatalistic helplessness and died at such an alarming rate. But neither can explain fully why colonists appeared to recover when strong governors forced them to work. There is a link in that some of the work was directed to building good, strong shelters and digging deep wells, as well as planting food. But the results were so dramatic and sudden—if we can trust Gates’s account that people began to recover in two weeks—that something else appears to have been at work.

Descriptions of the “most strange condition” of the colonists seem to find an echo in a phenomenon seen in other situations where large numbers of men are crowded into a confined situation, especially a situation from which they see no possibility of registers as “fatal withdrawing World War II and Jamestown in significant fort, in one by the garrison, both sets of men damaging to morale. In the Korean War, the enced feared they might still be alive, and the Virginia Company colonists at Jamestown have perished of ever:

Medical doctors weighed, and they reported. nourished and sick, but died of fatal withdrawal fatally ill. “Instead what apathetic that they ceased into themselves, referring to die. The report these men. They seem to continue fighting a sev what may have begun a prisoners to fatal withdrawal.

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Finally, and most un the victim. Just as Winter, Jamestown showed the critical mentality and Vita psychiatrists and others to argue that America had focused and dedicated to calling the phenomenon commentators demanding. Other social scientists believed that had been seen in the Civil War. If this analysis"
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* malnourished and only contribute part of patterns of fatalistic ther can explain fully mors forced them to xed to building good, lanting food. But the Gates’s account that else appears to have colonists seem to find large numbers of men ition from which they see no possibility of rescue. Most recently, this condition, known to psychologists as “fatal withdrawal,” was seen among Americans in prison camps during World War II and the Korean War. Such prison camps paralleled life in Jamestown in significant ways. In both settings, the men were confined to the fort, in one by the guards and in the other by fear of the Indians. Within the camp, both sets of men had little meaningful work to do, which was extremely damaging to morale. And both feared that they would never get out alive. In the Korean War, the enemy did not publish the names of prisoners, so prisoners feared they might not be released at war’s end. No one knew that captives were still alive, and therefore no one at home could demand their return. And the Virginia Company had threatened more than once simply to abandon the colonists at Jamestown if they continued their unproductive ways. Most must have despair of ever seeing friends and family again.

Medical doctors were among the prisoners in the twentieth-century examples, and they reported an amazing pattern. All the prisoners of war were malnourished and sick, but doctors and other prisoners agreed that the men who died of fatal withdrawal, or “give-up-itis” as the prisoners called it, were not fatally ill. “Instead what appeared to happen was that some men became so apathetic that they ceased to care about their bodily needs. They retreated further into themselves, refused to get any exercise, and eventually lay down as if waiting to die. The reports were emphatic concerning the lucidity and sanity of these men. They seemed willing to accept the prospect of death rather than to continue fighting a severely frustrating and depriving environment.” Thus what may have begun as a nutritional deficiency disease progressed in some prisoners to fatal withdrawal.

There are some striking similarities between the Jamestown case and reports from the Korean War prison camps. Prisoners were said to have been too lethargic to accept guards’ offers of a chance to go into nearby forests to collect firewood, and they sometimes refused to eat unfamiliar foods they were offered. Moreover, doctors from the prison camps indicated that “two things seemed to save the man close to ‘apathy’ death: getting him on his feet doing something, no matter how trivial, and getting him interested in some current or future problem.” Like Captain John Smith, doctors in the prison camps learned to force such men to save themselves through activity.

Finally, and most unfairly, in both cases the official response was to blame the victim. Just as William Crashaw thundered that the experience of Jamestown showed the degeneration of the English nation into “milksops,” so Army psychiatrists and others used reports from the Korean War prison camps to argue that America had gone soft and was not prepared to confront such focused and dedicated enemies as the Communist nations in the Cold War. Calling the phenomenon of fatal withdrawal “Something New in History,” commentators demanded a program of national renewal and character building. Other social scientists pointed out that the phenomenon was not, in fact, new but had been seen in every war in America’s history at least back to the Civil War. If this analysis of Jamestown’s early years is correct, fatal withdrawal played a role even in America’s founding.
Wealthy sponsors of colonies in England slowly came to realize that no system of rules could compel English men and women in America to work solely to enrich investors. The solution was to give incentives, in the form of land, to everyone who emigrated and to give investors land in proportion to their investment on which they could make money by using the estate well. Once this scheme was securely in place, the settlements began to explode over the land. By 1619 there were twenty-three plantations along the James River and two on the Eastern shore. By 1622 there were twenty-three more plantations and plans for others as far north as the Potomac River.

The big losers were the Indians, because their cultivation, gathering, and hunting required large tracts of open land, deliberately kept in various stages of development from meadow to woodland. But as English colonists, realizing the dream of a lifetime, began to establish permanent claims to one piece of land, the Indians’ way of life became impossible. As planters took up lands along the rivers, natives were denied access to the traditional water highways. And European animals, allowed to roam free and disturb natives’ clam banks and cornfields, completed what fixed cultivation began. In 1622 Powhatan’s successor, his brother Opechancanough, planned a simultaneous attack on all the settlements at once. Although about a third of the settlers were killed in this attack, it was too late to stop the increasing flow of settlers from England. The irony is that allowing deprived English men and women to have security they could never have achieved at home robbed Indian men and women of the security on which they had built their lives.