

TOPIC CENTER: EUROPEAN COLONIZATION, 1492–1752



During European colonization from 1492 to 1752, Spain, France, and the Netherlands developed settlements in the Americas. The age of exploration had opened up the world. Explorers looking for the profitable Northwest sea route to Asia had been unsuccessful; they never did find this passage, but they did find the Americas. When, with the support of the Spanish crown, Christopher Columbus landed in the New World in 1492, the floodgates opened to settlement and exploitation of the resources these territories had to offer. Unfortunately, the great gains of the Europeans would translate into tragic losses for the native peoples of North and South America. Although the English will later reign supreme, the early presence of the Spanish, French, and Dutch paved the way for the success of the English colonies.

Motivations for Colonization

Throughout the 15th century, Spain succeeded in igniting a worldwide era of colonization by leading in the establishment and development of colonies in the New World. What motivated the explorers, the royals that funded them, and the settlers to join the colonization effort? Wealth was a primary driver in settling lands rich in gold and minerals. In addition, vast expanses of fertile soil and an endless pool of cheap labor in the native population promised easy profits from such crops as sugarcane and tobacco.

Unlike the Spanish, who were motivated by gold and long-term settlement, the Dutch and the French focused their dreams of wealth on the fur industry, both colonies developing more so with the goal to boost trade rather than settlement. Despite this difference, all had one thing in common: spreading religion. Civilization efforts through conversion would justify the ways colonial powers achieved these economic gains.

Impact on Native Populations

Starting in the early 16th century, the Spanish crown used the *encomienda* system to enforce Spanish colonists' authority over indigenous peoples, who were used for labor. In theory, colonists were trusted to protect their charges; however, through abuses in this system, the native population was overworked and enslaved.

Colonial powers further disrupted indigenous ways of life by encroaching onto native lands, disrupting agricultural lifeways, and imposing religious practices that contradicted traditional spirituality. The French Jesuits had mild conversion practices compared to the Spanish, who insisted on conversion as a means to establish authority. Papal measures such as the *requerimiento* edict forced native peoples to acknowledge the Christian god as the only god, and authorized conversions under the threat of imprisonment or death. As a result, many Native Americans came to embrace Christianity or selectively joined certain aspects to their

own ways, forever altering traditional practices.

Perhaps the most tragic effect of this time on native peoples was the introduction of new diseases. Responsible for decimating entire populations, epidemic disease played a prominent and unexpected role in the success of colonizing efforts.

Governing at Home and Abroad

In order to ensure the success of their colonizing goals, colonial governments established vice royalties in these new territories, which were governed by a viceroy, who reported back to the home state. The Spanish government also created legal systems at home that would be applied abroad to effectively control the indigenous population. The *repartimiento* and *encomienda* systems created a labor force of native people bound to colonial leaders. For Spain and France, these appointed colonial governors worked with a legislature back home to rule their colonies. Religious leadership also had great political power in ruling colonies abroad, particularly for the Spanish. Through missions and the *encomienda* system, local leaders were able to extract local resources and control indigenous populations.

Unlike the Spanish and French, the Dutch had little centralized support from its home government. Instead, its efforts in North America were managed by a private company—the Dutch West India Company. Because the Dutch and the French were more interested in trade than in establishing any long-term settlements, the ways they cemented regional authority over their colonies were more focused on the building of forts throughout their territory that would support commerce and trade with the local populations.

Fatima Policarpo

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Dutch traders in New Netherland: Library of Congress

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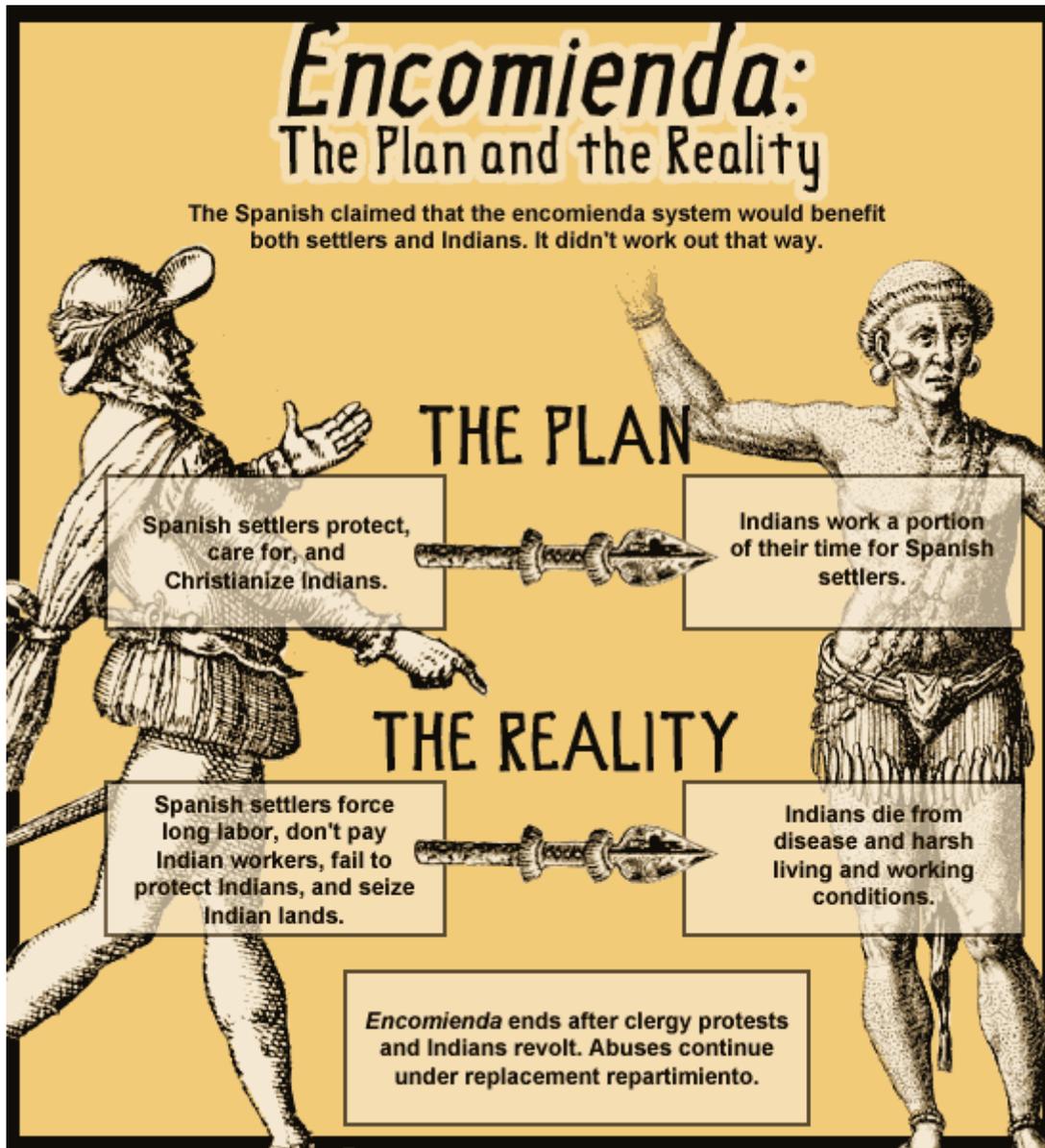
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European Colonization, 1492-1752

SPANISH ENCOMIENDA SYSTEM (VISUAL)



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EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT IN NORTH AMERICA, CA. 1680



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LEVEL 3 TEXT

European Colonization, 1492-1752

VIRGINIA COMPANY SEAL



SEAL OF THE VIRGINIA COMPANY.

[North Wind Picture Archives]

The seal of the Virginia Company. The Virginia Company of London was founded in 1606 as a private business, intent on gaining profit by exploiting the resources of the Chesapeake region in Virginia.

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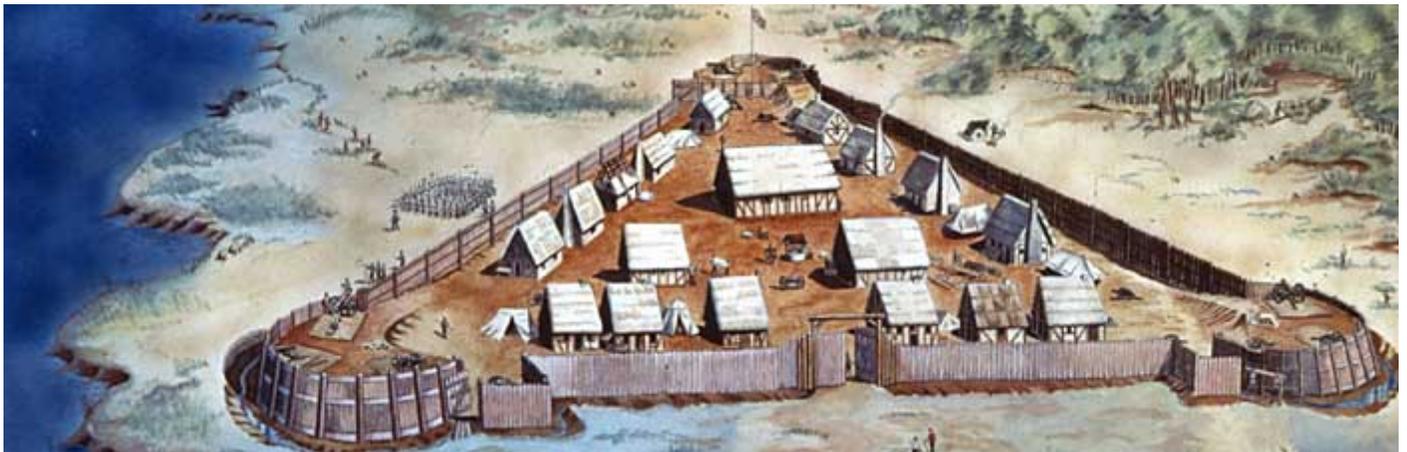
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The English Colonies, 1605-1760

JAMESTOWN



In May 1607, 104 English settlers dropped anchor and began to build North America's first permanent English colony in Jamestown, Virginia. The colonists built a triangle-shaped log fort on a peninsula in the James River, 60 miles from the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, and named it James Fort in honor of King James I of England. A number of other historic "firsts" happened in Jamestown, including the first cultivation of tobacco for export, the first representative government on the continent in 1619, the first import of African slaves into the colonies, and the first Anglican church in America. Jamestown was initially established as a trading outpost. Despite the initial economic failure of the colony, the development of tobacco in the region ensured that the Chesapeake would become an important region for the cash crop economy of British North America.



The Virginia Company

In 1606, James I had granted a charter to a group of London entrepreneurs to form the Virginia Company. Those wealthy gentlemen formed a joint stock corporation that was charged with the settlement of Virginia in the Americas. They invested their money in shares of the company and hoped to earn profits from the colonization of Virginia. The company had the power to appoint the people who would govern the settlement and the responsibility to provide settlers, supplies, and ships for the venture. However, due to the social status of many of the Jamestown settlers back in England, they were reluctant to work. The lack of a productive and reliable labor pool would contribute to the economic instability of the colony.

Economic Motives



The investors in the Virginia Company wanted to open new lands for exploration. They hoped that exploration would yield such lucrative resources as gold. In their search for profits, they also planned to build industries in the Americas. For example, as England was running out of timber, they hoped to harvest lumber and send it back to England for shipbuilding and home construction. Furthermore, they wanted to experiment at making products like glass and silk. In addition, they hoped to discover a quicker route to Asia that would lower the cost of bringing spices back to England. These lofty goals would later prove to undermine the potentiality of the

sustainable economic development of the colony.

A Bad Investment

During the first two years, Jamestown proved to be an extraordinarily bad investment for the Virginia Company. This was due to several factors. First of all, many of the early colonizers were English gentlemen and were therefore unwilling to do the work necessary to provide for themselves. Second, Jamestown was situated in a marshy area, and many of the colonists died from disease. Third, when the fort was barely a year old, it was accidentally burned to the ground, and the colonists had to rebuild it. Fourth, there was almost constant warfare with Native Americans, primarily the Algonquian people. Fifth, there were many internal disputes among those appointed to govern the colony. Finally, with the prospects for profit growing ever dimmer, there was a chronic shortage of money to keep the venture going. These chronic problems contributed to the search for political and economic stability by some Jamestown colonists.

John Smith's Efforts

In 1608, Capt. John Smith assumed command of Jamestown after displacing the existing leadership the prior year in an effort to improve conditions. Smith had also established a friendly diplomatic relationship with the Powhatan based on his encounter with the Algonquin Pocahontas, who is credited with saving his life after having been captured in 1607 by the Powhatan. Under Smith's control, Jamestown was administered much more efficiently. Smith declared that settlers must work or starve, thus persuading the reluctant populace to engage in the development of the colony and its economy. However, despite Smith's efforts, Jamestown was fraught by disease, starvation, and warfare with local Natives during the winter of 1609–1610. Only an infusion of new labor from England would save the colony from utter failure.



Measured Success

New settlers arrived in June 1611. A year later, tobacco was planted, and the colony finally had an export. The importation of a new strain of tobacco by John Rolfe played a crucial role in the economic stability of the Jamestown colony. Rolfe was also well known for his marriage to Pocahontas. Also, the implementation of the headright system, in which more people brought in to settle more lands, assured the expansion of the colony's economy. Among these newer immigrants, more indentured servants were brought in to help develop the economy. Many of them came from the lower social classes of England. Hoping to introduce stability by the development of families, the Virginia Company arranged for the immigration of large numbers of women to the colony. By 1602, thousands of settlers had arrived to Jamestown from England, contributing to its expansion. Nevertheless, unrealized profits continued to reduce the ranks of investors, and in 1624, the Crown finally revoked the charter of the Virginia Company and placed the colony under royal control.

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John Smith: Library of Congress

Virginia Company seal: North Wind Picture Archives

Legislative assembly in Jamestown: Library of Congress

James Fort: MPI/Getty Images

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European Colonization, 1492-1752

POWHATAN: REMARKS TO CAPT. JOHN SMITH (CA. 1609)

The most powerful Indian chief in North America in the early 17th century, Powhatan ruled over a vast confederacy of tribes throughout the South from his base in Virginia. He had an erratic relationship with the Jamestown colonists, as the two sides maintained a tenuous peace. Nevertheless, despite their mutual suspicion, Powhatan supplied the colonists with food during several crucial periods and thus saved the fledgling colony from total disaster. Powhatan was succeeded at his death in 1618, by his brother Opechancanough, who was far less tolerant of the colonists and organized the devastating Massacre of 1622, in which one-third of the white population died at Indian hands.

Captain Smith, some doubt I have of your coming hither . . . for many do inform me, your coming is not for trade, but to invade my people and possess my Country. . . . I am now grown old, and must soon die; and the succession must descend, in order, to my brothers, Opitchapan, Opekankanough, and Catataugh, and then to my two sisters, and their two daughters. I wish their experience was equal to mine; and that your love to us might not be less than ours to you. Why should you take by force that from us which you can have by love? Why should you destroy us, who have provided you with food? What can you get by war? We can hide our provisions, and fly into the woods; and then you must consequently famish by wronging your friends. What is the cause of your jealousy? You see us unarmed, and willing to supply your wants, if you will come in a friendly manner, and not with swords and guns, as to invade an enemy. I am not so simple, as not to know it is better to eat good meat, lie well, and sleep quietly with my women and children; to laugh and be merry with the English; and, being their friend, to have copper, hatchets, and whatever else I want, than to fly from all, to lie cold in the woods, feed upon acorns, roots, and such trash, and to be so hunted, that I cannot rest, eat, or sleep. In such circumstances, my men must watch, and if a twig should break, all would cry out, "Here comes Capt. Smith": and so, in this miserable manner, to end my miserable life; and, Capt. Smith, this might be soon your fate too, through your rashness and unadvisedness. I, therefore, exhort you to peaceable councils; and, above all, I insist that the guns and swords, the cause of all our jealousy and uneasiness, be removed and sent away.

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