




# CHAPTER ONE

# Beginnings

## Chapter 1: Key Concepts

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-  What key characteristics stand out most from early Native American civilizations?
-  What do you feel were the main motivations behind European exploration efforts?
-  What is your evaluation of the positive and negative long-term impacts of European exploration efforts?

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## Introduction

Long before Europeans set foot in North America, native peoples had carved out their cultures. Initially pursuing big game, they adapted to a changing climate and combined hunting with farming that allowed a more sedentary lifestyle. Their populations gradually increased, and complex social structure followed. By the 1400s, European navigational knowledge and technology had developed to the point that they were able to extend their reach across the Atlantic Ocean. While Columbus was not the first European to set foot in North America, he did initiate an avalanche of explorers eager to explore and exploit this “undiscovered” continent. However, once here, Europeans from the Spanish to the English wasted little time and resources exploring and settling. While many had certain expectations upon arriving, they often had to adapt to their surroundings. It was clear though that once Europeans began arriving they were here to stay.

## Native Americans: From Hunters and Gatherers to Planters

Human beings emerged as a distinct species over millions of years, gradually spread worldwide, but finally arrived in the Western Hemisphere less than 30,000 years ago. While there are contending theories on how the first Americans arrived on the North American continent, it is likely that the earliest migrants crossed over via an exposed area of land that today is the Bering Strait, the body of water separating Alaska from Siberia. It was their descendants, which spread across both North and South Americas over thousands of years that became the first Americans. Today, as many as 95 percent of native peoples throughout the Americas are likely descended from this original migration.

We know little about any Americans of this early period except that they lived largely a hunting and gathering existence. They pursued big game animals, some of which are now extinct, including saber-tooth tigers, woolly mammoths, and mastodons. Their predominant red meat diet was supplemented by wild berries, fruit, and nuts gathered from surrounding forests.

Time passed, and North America’s climate warmed. Many of these big game species vanished as a result of either climate change or perhaps over hunting. Smaller animals were now the target, with deer now emerging as the most important meat in the diet. The warmer climate also caused the number of edible plants to increase, and they too became more important. The earliest peoples did not practice agriculture and had no domesticated animals, except maybe for dogs, which likely came with the original Asian migrants.

Over time, climate changes throughout the Americas would support the development of crops such as corn, beans, squash, and potatoes. Early Americans discovered that corn and beans could be planted together; the bean plants climbed the cornstalks. Corn or beans alone lacked certain nutrients, but their combination provided a healthy



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diet. Both plants required a long growing season and for centuries, and were planted only in tropical or near-tropical areas. Gradually, American farmers developed strains of corn and beans that matured more rapidly, and cultivation of these fast-ripening varieties spread throughout North America, reaching the American Southwest around 2500 BCE and spreading as far north as southern Canada by the year 500.

The development of agriculture had a profound effect upon the American peoples. For most, hunting became less important, and wherever soil and climate encouraged crops, the need to maintain vast, unpopulated areas for wild game declined. At the same time, the cultivation of crops made nomadic life impossible since people had to tend their crops until harvest.

Even with systematic agriculture, it was difficult to remain in one place for good. Corn, unfortunately, rapidly depleted the soil of crucial nutrients. Farmers learned to put fertility back into the soil by burning their fields after each crop. These burned fields also produced an abundance of certain plants, which provided food for deer. After a number of years, however, the soil became so poor that the cornfields had to be abandoned. Native peoples then moved on to clear new parts of the forest for fresh fields. Moreover, inhabitants seasonally migrated to places that provided different food sources such as fish or fruit.

## The Effects of Agriculture

With the rise of cultivated crops such as corn, a larger, more readily obtained food supply almost certainly led to an increase in population and societal complexity. One such place was Moundville, a native settlement near Tuscaloosa, Alabama situated on the banks of the Black Warrior River. Moundville was occupied from around the year 1000 to 1450. It was one of the largest centers of Mississippian Indian culture in North America. It is estimated that at its cultural height, Moundville's native population was around 1,000, but thousands more lived in surrounding villages that were economically and socially connected to the larger center.

Mississippian Indian culture was heavily dependent on the cultivation of corn. This nutritious and abundant plant could be easily stored for the winter months and used for spring plantings. The river valleys of the Mississippi provided the proper landscape for the growing of corn. Native societies, such as Moundville, evolved along these rich, alluvial plains and Archeologists, and historians use the term Mississippian to characterize these societies that arose.



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Mound built by Mississippian Indian culture of North America



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Most Mississippian Native societies, including Moundville, were organized in chiefdoms. These were kin-based societies in which people closely associated them, and where one's social status within the community was determined. In these chiefdoms, the ruler typically belongs to a family of notoriety and whose privileges others did not share. A close comparison might be that of a king, but typically he was not as powerful. Chiefs would not, for example, have a full taxing authority or the power to maintain a standing army.

A key characteristic of Moundville, as well as with most other Mississippian cultures, are large earthen, flat-topped mounds. Within Moundville's 300-acre site, there are 26 mounds that enclose a central plaza. They are of varying sizes, which suggest that they were built for different purposes. It is still unclear to the precise purpose of the smaller ones, but the larger ones are thought to have supported noble residences as well as structures for religious ceremonies.

Moundville is a testimony to the fact that America has a rich and diverse past. We dwell in a land that has been inhabited for millennia. The Mississippian culture, of which Moundville was associated, was the only one of many native cultures that had inhabited the land over the stretches of time. Distinctive groups with differing languages, social organization, religious practices, and sources of livelihood gradually evolved.

## North American Indians in 1500

While Moundville and other Mississippian civilization centers were substantial in their organization and influence, they did not last. While it is not clear why the Moundville settlement disappeared, but by around 1450, some of the mounds had been abandoned, and a loss of religious importance is noted in others. There was also evidence of a decrease in the importation of goods that had given prestige to the nobility. It is thought that for some reason the Chiefs lost their ability to reciprocate services to the people in exchange for their loyalty. As this mutually beneficial relationship waned, cultural centers such as Moundville fragmented and the population scattered.

By 1500, the American Indians, as Christopher Columbus would so famously misname, thinking that he had found the outer reaches of India and its peoples, had been in this land for thousands of years. They had evolved from nomadic hunters and gatherers to having built and maintained largely settled communities, whose societal complexity was most impressive. Although genetically closely related, the different Indian tribes and villages spoke hundreds of languages and thousands of dialects. Social units were governed by complex rules that recognized the primacy of the family-based clan, yet tribes frequently ignored clan loyalty to split into new ones.

Europeans thought of tribal Chiefs as kings, but typically, like with Moundville, few Chiefs held the absolute power of European monarchs. Although they often inherited their positions, Chiefs could be deposed easily. Chiefs ruled by following the consensus that emerged from tribal councils. Political discussion and negotiation, both within councils and between tribes, included many rituals, and leaders sealed agreements by passing around and smoking a tobacco-filled peace pipe.

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Indian cultures showed significant regional variation. In the Northeast, with its long winters and short growing season, corn was less important in the diet than game and fish. The Algonquin and Iroquois built snug wooden houses as long as 90 feet, aptly called long houses by Europeans. Each long house had a series of rooms and housed several nuclear families. These tribes built their houses inside villages walled with wooden palisades to protect themselves against their enemies.

In the Southeast, the warmer climate and longer growing season enabled the Greek and Choctaw to plant two corn crops a year. Plentiful food gave rise to a denser population, larger villages, and more powerful Chiefs. In this region, natives designed housing to let in breezed during the hot summers as well as to protect against the cold winter weather. Families lived one to a dwelling, but housing was relatively close, and villages were usually fenced.

Among the Creek Indians, young men from rival clans took part in a ball game similar to modern lacrosse. In fact, some of the better collegiate lacrosse players today are of Native descent. The original game involved using a stick with a loop at the end to put a ball through a goal. All the men from two clans played at the same time, with hundreds of players crowding the field. As violent as football, the game had no real team strategy. Each warrior-player sought individually to put the ball through the goal. Games sometimes lasted for hours, and severe injuries, even deaths, occurred. Spectators and players placed

bets, and a clan might even disband in humiliation after losing several matches in a row.

The plains area, stretching from Texas to South and North Dakota and west to the Rocky Mountains, was sparsely populated by Arapaho and Pawnee buffalo hunters. Having neither horses nor guns, they captured buffalo with cunning. They might frighten the animals into self-destructive stampedes or force them off a cliff. These nomadic Indians lived in teepees, whose buffalo skins and wooden poles could be put up and taken down quickly.



San Esteban Del Rey Church and Convent in Acoma, New Mexico. This town has been continuously settled since 1075, making it the oldest community in the United States

In the dry Southwest, the Pueblo tribes, such as the Hopi and Anansi, built dense villages of adobe houses and grew corn using dry farming techniques, principally mulching to prevent evaporation of water from the soil. The most stationary of the tribes in North America, they developed elaborate rituals, including rain dances and sun worship, which revolved around the desert landscape. They conducted religious rites in underground ceremonial chambers called kivas. One native village, the town of Acoma, New Mexico, was

established at or near its present site in the year 900 and has been continuously settled since 1075, making it the oldest community in the United States.

## The Europeans Cometh

Around the year 850, people known as the Vikings or Northmen burst from the frigid seas of Northern Europe to rage havoc on many European towns and villages. The Vikings were able to venture far out to sea because of their very seaworthy and highly adaptable vessels known as long ships. These aggressive Europeans used the long ship to make it all the way across the Atlantic, briefly building a settlement in the year 1000 in North America in what is today Newfoundland. However, by the time Christopher Columbus arrived in the Caribbean Islands, this Viking colony had been long forgotten. Despite the exploits of this fearless culture, it was Portuguese sailors and especially the Spanish explorer Christopher Columbus who would touch off a European race to build colonial empires in the Americas. The pope, with the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, tried to divide the world between Spain and Portugal, but other countries, particularly France and England, ignored the papal decree and sent out expeditions. The Spanish, however, gained the lead in the early 1500s. Not to be outdone, the French joined the party but focused their energies on the northern mainland. Last but certainly not least were the English. Despite the failures of their early expeditions, seeds were sewn that would later produce much fruit.



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A handmade Viking sketch

## The Earliest Sailors

While the Vikings are thought to have been the first Europeans to set foot in North America, their settlement did not last long. However, their adventures piqued the interest of other Europeans who were more than ready, able, and willing to seek out their adventures. Europeans had long sailed back and forth across the Mediterranean and along the coastal regions of Europe and northwest Africa. The desire to venture further out into the rough waters of the deep Atlantic required the construction of larger and more seaworthy vessels. These ships had come online by the late fifteenth century as well as better sail rigging to enable ships to sail into the wind. Instruments such as the astrolabe allowed sailors to chart their courses more accurately. The ships were small and boxy, certainly so compare to today. Most were only about 70 feet long and easily buffeted by the high seas and strong winds of oceanic travel. However, sail they did and despite tremendous



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challenges made progress first sailing along the coast of Africa, and later venturing further out to sea.

In the 1400s, the Portuguese became Europe's premier maritime explorers. They sailed along the African coast, settled the Azores Islands, and eventually passed around Africa's Cape of Good Hope, making contact with India and the Africa–India–Middle East trade. Their advances in maritime sailing would prove decisive as the stage was set for greater oceanic adventurers.

## The Spanish Emerge and Beyond

The Spanish, too, were interested in exploration. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in 1494 commissioned Christopher Columbus to sail west from Spain in search of a short route to Asia and its spices. On August 3, 1492, Columbus set sail from the southwestern coast of Spain, and on the morning of October 12, 1492, he and his three ships blundered upon what he thought was the outskirts of the Asian continent. Instead, it was an island in the Caribbean Sea, a part of a chain of islands known today as the Bahamas. Colum-

bus, mistaking the islands of the Caribbean for outposts on the Asian mainland, called the area the "Indies" and the native peoples "Indians." Both names stuck although people eventually renamed these islands the West Indies to distinguish them from the East Indies off the southeastern coast of Asia.

Within a generation of Columbus's death in 1506, the first wave of Spanish adventurers had seized possession of most of the coastal lands of Central America and South America. The conquest of the Caribbean basin climaxed in 1513 with Vasco de Balboa's exploration of the Isthmus of Panama and his discovery of the Pacific Ocean, and with Ponce de Leon's discovery of Florida.

The second wave of Spanish expansion in America was stimulated by rumors of vast treasures hidden in a highly civilized state deep in the interior. In the course of this second wave, the empire of the Aztec ruler Montezuma in Mexico was conquered between 1519 and 1521. This most dramatic

and bloody conquest was led by the resourceful, ruthless, and incredibly energetic conquistador Hernando Cortes. There are no heroes in this tale of slaughter and conquest. On one side were about 600 passionate and hard driven Spanish adventurers led by Cortez, who overcame fearful hardships to plunder and ultimately to destroy an ancient civilization. On the other side were the equally courageous but bewildered and less technologically advanced natives.

Other conquistadores extended Cortes's conquest of the Mexican world into North America. Between 1528 and 1536, Cabeza de Vaca circled the northern edge of the Gulf of Mexico and reached the Gulf of California. Between 1539 and 1541, Hernando de Soto cut



*Christophorus  
Columbus*

Portrait of Christopher Columbus

through the forests of northern Florida and what would later be the southeastern United States and is thought to be the first European to view the great Mississippi River. De Soto's expedition is comparable with that of South American conquistador Francisco Pizarro in terms of bravery, endurance, and sure cruelty afforded the natives. While the great Mississippian cultural centers had disappeared by the time of de Soto's expedition, complex native societies remained scattered throughout the area of his ventures. In fact, de Soto and his comrades were the first Europeans to encounter the still existing large Indian chiefdoms in the southern reaches of North America, and were also virtually the last to see them at their height of development. Undoubtedly, their collapse was caused in part by the economic and social impacts of the de Soto expedition but even more by the introduction of germs and viruses for which the natives had little to no immunity.

The third great wave of Spanish conquest was led by an illiterate adventurer, Francisco Pizarro, who launched a series of expeditions from Panama through the jungles of Ecuador and northern Peru into the heartland of the elaborate Incan empire, which had been weakened by civil war. By a trick, Pizarro managed to capture the Incan emperor, whom he murdered after extracting a heavy ransom of gold and silver, and then destroyed much of the Incan army and nobility. Next, he proceeded to strip city after city of their treasures, to embroil both natives and conquerors in devastating warfare, and to establish in 1535 the new central city of Lima. From the plundered Incan lands, further expeditions were begun, first into Ecuador, then into Chile and northern Argentina (1535–1537).

Radiating out from these three main lines of conquest (first, the subjugation of the Caribbean Islands and coastal areas; then Mexico and southern North America; and finally the invasion of South America), Spain's empire in the Americas expanded in all directions. By 1607, when England established its first settlement at Jamestown, Spain's American empire extended nearly 8,000 miles, from California to the southern tip of South America. The empire was the largest the Western world had known since the collapse of the Roman Empire. Its only competitor in the Western Hemisphere had been Portugal, which had controlled the coastal areas of Brazil until the union of the Spanish and Portuguese thrones (1580–1640) gave Spain legal jurisdiction even there.



Execution of the last Incan Emperor, Atahualpa (1497–1533), by Spanish conquistador, Francisco Pizarro, on August 29, 1533

## The French in Hot Pursuit

While the Spanish roamed the Southeast and Southwest, the French attempted to concentrate on the mainland further north, nearest to the rich fisheries off the Newfoundland coast. In 1534, Jacques Cartier explored the St. Lawrence Gulf, hoping to find a passage to China.

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Samuel de Champlain statue in  
Quebec City, Canada

A year later he discovered and named the St. Lawrence River, explored the river as far as what is now Montreal, and then wintered at a well-constructed fort near present-day Quebec City. Cartier traded knives and trinkets for the local Indians' furs. The high quality of the furs, as well as the absence of gold or silver, led the French to pursue explorations to extend trade with fur-gathering Indians in the colder parts of North America.

At the time of Cartier's expeditions, the area was inhabited by Iroquois-speaking natives. When the French finally did establish a permanent settlement at Quebec under Samuel de Champlain in 1608, these Indians had been pushed out by Algonquin-speakers from the north. Indian tribes were quick to gain an advantage over each, which only accelerated as the Europeans, looking to secure every advantage possible, played one tribe against another. The Indians, in turn, learned to play the same game, aligning themselves with one European power but switching sides as it benefitted them.

### England—Last but Certainly Not Least

England's entry into the age of overseas expeditions was the opposite of Spain's. Where Spain had been swift, England was slow; where Spain had been deliberate and decisive, England was muddled in purpose. For Spain, America yielded riches almost immediately. For England, at least initially, America's balance sheet was deep in the red, and colonists themselves faced a historically dismal period known as the "Starving Times."

While England was a late comer to the party, it had not started out that way. English claims to North America were established in 1497–1498, only five years after Columbus' initial venture to the West Indies. The person responsible was John Cabot, who had been commissioned by Henry VII to explore Newfoundland, roughly the same area that the Vikings had visited some 500 years before. However, neither the crown nor any explorers showed any real interest in developing these distant lands. Suddenly, in the early 1550s, fortunes changed which essentially marked the beginnings of British colonization. The development was complex, and it involved two shifts. The first involved England's economy and the second her relationship with other countries.

England's prosperity in the first half of the sixteenth century was based on the growing European demand for its raw wool and woolen cloth, which were marketed largely in Antwerp, in what is now Belgium. Throughout the reign of King Henry VIII, more and more capital and labor had become involved in this dominant commercial enterprise. As more farmland was converted into pastureland for raising sheep to meet the rising demand for wool, England's financial stability had become increasingly tied to the Antwerp markets. However, by the mid-sixteenth century, Antwerp's wool market was saturated, and merchant activity would have to focus elsewhere.



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While England had begun to flex its economic muscles, Spain was the dominant power in the New World. In fact, Spain was then the world's greatest power and its power appeared to be stem from its empire. England, a relatively poor, weak nation, especially in comparison to Spain, needed to meet this challenge. The English, as islanders, were naturally a seafaring people, and they hungered to become like Spain or to at least take what they could from them. Thus, England was about to enter a new phase in its history.

Queen Elizabeth (1585–1603) considered Spain a threat to England's future endeavors. To weaken them while strengthening her kingdom, she authorized expeditions by privateers against Spanish silver shipments from the Americas. In the 1560s, John Hawkins and Francis Drake, part of a group of privateers known as “sea dogs,” plundered their way across the high seas to Spain's horror.

As these overseas enterprises continued, the idea of colonization gradually developed. Much of the English effort at this time went into the search beyond Newfoundland for a northern sea route to Asia called the Northwest Passage. Such an opening, everyone agreed, would enable England to bypass Spain's control of South America and give the English an exclusive direct link to the profitable Chinese market. Unfortunately, despite battling howling snowstorms and dodging towering icebergs, no such link with the Far East was ever found.

Despite obvious disappointment, the English forged ahead with their colonization plans. Directed by the statesman and swashbuckling adventurer Sir Walter Raleigh, a group of settlers in 1585 founded a colony on the Outer Banks of North America, in what was then called Virginia, but today is North Carolina. Raleigh was to join the colony later, but war had broken out between England and Spain, and he was not permitted to leave. The colony survived for about a year, but the settlers encountered hostile natives and were forced to return to England the following year. In 1587, another contingent of settlers—117 men, women, and children—arrived under Governor John White. White returned quickly to England for more supplies, but the threat of open war with Spain and the actions of privateering kept supply ships from reaching the colony. When White finally made it back to the colony in 1590, he found all the settlers



Walter Raleigh (1552–1618)

Georgios Kollidas/Shutterstock.com



Elizabeth I (1533–1603)

Georgios Kollidas/Shutterstock.com

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gone. The only sign of the colonists was the marking CRO on a tree and CROATAN on a door. There was no sign of the Maltese cross, the agreed-upon sign for distress. Consequently, White believed that the markings likely meant that the colonists had voluntarily moved to Croatoan Island, where friendly natives were known to live. However, a storm prevented the English from landing there, and the precise fate of these people remains a mystery.

In comparison with the bold and hugely successful first thrusts of the Spanish in America, the English experience reflected a fumbling, failing, almost pathetic affair. Raleigh's Roanoke venture dramatically underscored the limitations that defeated English colonization in the reign of Elizabeth I. Yet it also revealed the basic conditions that would shape the successful English settlements in the early seventeenth century.

Several links of significance had become clear during these earliest and least successful years of England's colonization of America. First, there existed in England leaders who were different from the Spanish conquerors. The Spaniards, "drunk with a heroic and brutal dram," as one Spanish poet later described them, were the sons of poor farmers and townsmen, many of whom were illiterate. However, the leaders of the English New-World quest, such as Sir Walter Raleigh, Francis Drake, John Hawkins, and John White, were the well-educated younger sons of English gentry, bred in secure landed establishments and familiar with the sea from childhood. English law barred younger sons from inheriting family properties, and these men were eager to find a way of reestablishing themselves on the land similar to the genteel conditions from which they came.

Second, it was clear that in England, there was a mass of laborers available for emigration. London, whose population rose from 60,000 in 1500 to 200,000 in 1600, was swollen with unemployed workers, due in large part to the collapse of the wool industry. Officials were convinced that England's well-being was threatened by an idle labor force that consumed more than it contributed. For many, the most attractive remedy was to seek their fortune in a new land.

Third, there was plenty of capital available for investment in overseas ventures, as well as abundant business interest in mobilizing that capital and directing it to profitable uses in colonization. While the early voyages to Virginia were financed by well-to-do gentry, they did not have enough resources to support further, larger-scale efforts. In 1589, Raleigh transferred control of the Virginia enterprise to a London business syndicate that was headed by Sir Thomas Smith, one of the wealthiest merchants of the era. It would be Smith and others like him who would launch the first new wave of colonization in the early seventeenth century.

It had become clear too, in the later years of Elizabeth's reign that her government would play a minor role in the new expeditions. It would legalize exploration and settlement and would have some say in the plans, but would neither initiate nor organize any endeavors. In addition, the English crown had no desire to extend its direct rule over distant territories conquered or settled by Englishmen. The burden of governing the colonies, similar to the burden of financing them, would have to be borne by the organizers. The crown was there, but acting only as a kind of overlay; the governments themselves would be semi-independent self-governing units.

England's war with Spain, which had begun in the 1580s, finally ended in 1604. Peace released the powerful expansionist impulses that had been building up in England for half a century, and the resulting lunge into overseas enterprise in the reigns of James I (1603–1625) and his son Charles I (1625–1649) was spectacular. The famous settlements at Jamestown, at Plymouth, and around Massachusetts Bay were only fragments of a huge effort that reached into many areas of the globe. It involved hundreds of thousands of Englishmen of all descriptions and cost millions of pounds.

As future colonizers looked out at the world beyond England, they saw a single arc of overseas territories suitable for colonization sweeping out from their island. This arc enclosed Ireland, Newfoundland, and the mainland coast of North America south to the Caribbean. It was natural for the English to consider nearby Ireland, which was described in a travel book of 1617 as “this famous island in the Virginia Sea,” as the first and primary object of their colonization efforts in the early seventeenth century. When, in 1607, two of the most powerful Irish earls resisted English authority and ultimately fled the British Isles, the English confiscated their vast properties. They largely cleared this immense territory—which covered six of the nine counties of the northern province of Ulster—of its native population and sold parcels of the land to prospective settlers. After an Irish rebellion in 1641, an estimated 120,000 English and Scottish men, women, and children had settled in Ireland. This migration was six times larger than the famous “Great Migration” that settled New England in the same period. Yet Ulster was the scene of only one of the colonization efforts of the time. Besides Ireland, Virginia, and Massachusetts, English settlements were established on several Caribbean Islands, Newfoundland, South America, and India.

In this global context, the first English settlements on the North American mainland were relatively small undertakings, and their early histories become understandable only in terms of the greater whole. While these American communities would in time have a unique historical importance, originally they shared characteristics common to the rest of the earliest seventeenth-century enterprises. Moreover, of these common characteristics, none was more important than the way in which they were financed.

Whatever their founders' ultimate dreams, these earliest English colonies had to be first financed by profit-seeking joint-stock companies. Eleven commercial companies bore the main financial burden of the settlements that were launched before 1640. They raised the needed capital by selling stock to a remarkable broad range of the English population. Thousands invested, and the funds raised by these investments were, for the most part, managed by men who worked not only within the usual constraints of business operations but also under two very special pressures. These pressures explain much of the hardship and tragedy of life in the earliest settlements.



Landing of 20 African captives at Jamestown from Dutch man-of-war 1619

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First, the joint stocks—the initial capital funds—of these ventures were not expected to endure. That is; shareholders did not expect to leave their funds in these companies over a long period and to draw a steady dividend income from them. Instead, investors hoped to benefit from the quick liquidation of the whole enterprise at the end of a single voyage or after a set number of years. It was expected that at such a time, the original capital plus accumulated profits would be distributed to the investors. Whether there would be any further investments beyond the initial one would depend on the business prospects at the time of liquidation. Many of the settlers were in effect employees of the company that had organized the venture, for a stated term of years; thus, they were a lot of pressure to produce immediate profits. If they failed to ship back tangible proof of financial success, they would be cut off and would be forced to fend for themselves. Consequently, the settlers did not carefully explore their surroundings to acclimate themselves to the strange American environment. Instead, they spent much of their time scrabbling for gold in every shallow stream and plunging recklessly into the backcountry to investigate confused native reports of great cities or vast sources of furs or precious metals. The pressures on the settlers were further intensified by the technical fact that the shareholders in these early joint-stock companies had unlimited legal liability. The backers of the settlements were personally liable, without limit, for all debts the settlement companies might incur. Investors were for this reason therefore extremely sensitive to any possibility of failure. They had no choice but to abandon doubtful enterprises as quickly as possible.

The result of these conditions was desperation, starvation, and at times chaos for England's first North American colonists, as well as company bankruptcies. For there were only three possible sources of quick profits for the colonists: First, they might have found valuable resources on the surface of the land, loaded them onto boats, and rushed them back to investors. Second, they might have encountered a docile native population and organized it quickly into labor gangs to dig out the fewer accessible resources. Third, settlers might have discovered new routes to rich, exotic markets. None of these possibilities proved realistic on the coasts of North America. Consequently, after the first shipments, investors withheld life-sustaining supplies from the settlements, and one company after another failed. Sheer accident provided most of the profits that were made at the start. In one incident, the Providence Island Company was lucky enough to capture a Spanish treasure ship worth over 50,000 pounds.

Luck accidents of this kind, however, were rare. Sooner or later almost every one of the companies that had financed settlements in British North America failed, and as they did so, the original investors sought desperately to find secondary sources of profit. Some stockholders, seeking to recover their losses, funded “magazines”—supplies of goods to be sold at high prices to the needy settlers. In fact, the Virginia Company alone created 50 of these private enterprises, but none succeeded long term.

As their financial prospects dimmed, many investors withdrew altogether from the ventures. In these cases, colonists found themselves abruptly cut off from their backers, and for most of them, the transition to self-sustained community life was exceedingly difficult. Even in the best of circumstances, the first inhabitants of Jamestown or Plymouth or

Bermuda would have had a shock in adjusting to the wilderness environment. Forced to search for sources of immediate profit while neglecting the basics of survival, many found the struggle unendurable and succumbed to despair, disease, or relentless harassment of the local native population.

The narratives of the first settlements make for painful reading. There was heroism, but there was also murderous selfishness. Death and misery were everywhere. It is perhaps not surprising that the best organized and most successful of the earliest communities were those in which strong religious beliefs prevailed. For only the otherworldly goals, the fierce determination, and the inner certainty of the Pilgrim and Puritan leaders could withstand the disintegrating effects of the “starving times.” As one pilgrim put it, “Weave in faith and God will find the thread.”

## Conclusion

By the early seventeenth century, life in North America had taken a dramatic turn. Where Native Americans had once populated the continent with cultures that were profoundly sophisticated, their numbers had been reduced to a fraction of what they were prior to European exploration and settlement. Those tribes would continue to do their best to maintain a style of life to which they were accustomed, but would face increasing uncertainty as Europeans interacted and sought to gain advantages where they could. A new people had now found their footing in North America. The Spanish kicked it off by exploring the southeastern part of the continent. Following close behind were the French. They explored the area of what is today Nova Scotia and on into the interior north where they traded with native peoples and built settlements. While these nations did their part in the race to subdue the continent, it was the English who made the largest impact. In fact, over the next century, they would come to establish 13 colonies that would permanently alter the course of North America’s development.

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