What Happened to the Lost Colony?

People have speculated about the fate of the colonists for more than four hundred years. What do you think happened to the Roanoke colony?

Did They Move In with Manteo?

Governor John White believed that the colonists found refuge with the Croatoan people led by Manteo. His only evidence was CROATOAN carved on a post at the colony's deserted fort. Disaster struck White's relief voyage of 1590. Seven men drowned while attempting a landing. Then severe storms forced the remaining crew to seek safer seas.

Unable to interest backers in paying for another rescue attempt, White gave up the search. He wrote in 1593 that the relief of the colony was left "to the merciful help of the Almighty." He added, "I would to God my wealth were answerable to my will," so that he could pay for another voyage himself.

What about that idea?

No historians or archaeologists have found evidence proving or disproving John White's theory. The carving remains the most reliable clue to the destination of the colonists when they left Roanoke. Did they go somewhere else later? People have been trying to answer that question for four centuries.

Were They Murdered?

The colonists who settled at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607 sent expeditions to search for the Roanoke colonists. They gathered information from Native Americans they met. Powhatan, a powerful Indian leader in the Chesapeake Bay region, told Captain John Smith that he had killed the Roanoke colonists, who had been living with the Chesapeake Indians. Other reports suggested that a few English survived this attack and were living with other tribes. The last search parties, sent out in 1609–1612, learned nothing more about the colonists and presumed they had all perished.

What about that idea?

No firsthand evidence of Powhatan's self-reported executions has turned up. No eyewitness accounts survive. The reports about survivors are intriguing but are not absolute proof of Powhatan's claims. The lack of any trace of the colonists, however, makes his story seem possible.

Did They Become the Hatteras Indians?

John Lawson, explorer, naturalist, and surveyor general of the Carolina colony, visited the abandoned fort site at Roanoke in the early 1700s. He found "a Brass-Gun, a Powder-Horn, and one small Quarter deck-Gun, made of Iron Staves, and hoop'd with the same Metal." Lawson also went to Hatteras Island, where he met Native Americans that he assumed were descendants of the lost colonists. He wrote: "These tell us, that several of their Ancestors were white People, and could talk in a Book [read], as we do; the Truth of
which is confirm'd by gray Eyes being found frequently amongst these Indians, and no others. They value themselves extremely for their Affinity to the English, and are ready to do them all friendly Offices.”

Lawson speculated that Indian “treachery,” as well as a lack of supplies, doomed the colony. This treachery took the form of assimilation, “for we may reasonably suppose that the English were forced to cohabit with them, for Relief and Conversation; and that in process of Time, they conform’d themselves to the Manners of their Indian Relations. And thus we see, how apt Humane Nature is to degenerate.”

What about that idea?

Lawson’s observations support John White’s beliefs about the fate of the colony. The Indians Lawson met on Hatteras Island lived relatively close to the Croatoan settlement known to the colonists more than a century earlier. Lawson’s evident disdain for the indigenous culture reflects the attitudes of most English colonists in the 1600s and 1700s.

Did They Starve to Death?

In 1857 historian Francis Lister Hawks criticized the early colonists for failings of ambition and character but concluded that “we are inclined to think that these causes would not have prevented the successful establishment of White’s colony, had it not been subjected to the horrors of famine. Time and experience would probably have corrected the evils we have named; but for starvation there was no remedy.”

What about that idea?

Later historians have noted that in the late 1500s, Roanoke Island had an abundance of wild game, edible plants, and shellfish and other seafood. It seems unlikely that the colonists could have starved, although they may have suffered from malnutrition.

Are Their Descendants Lumbee Indians?

Oral tradition among the Lumbees maintains that the colonists intermarried with local Indians and migrated southwest to what is now Robeson County.

Hamilton MacMillan, a Robeson County resident, published this theory and gathered evidence supporting it in the 1880s. He noted shared surnames among the lists of colonists and Robeson County Indian families. He also detailed local pronunciations and vocabulary that hearkened back to Elizabethan English.

What about that idea?

Historians have pointed out that the names shared by the colonists and the Indians are quite common and may have been found in English settlements for the past three hundred years. The speech patterns in Robeson County resemble those in other relatively isolated regions of the East Coast that saw early and sustained English colonization.

Did the Spanish Attack and Capture Them?

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Writer Robert E. Betts suggested in the 1930s that Spanish soldiers destroyed the colony. “It is possible, judging by the relations between Spain and England at that time, that the colonists were removed to Spain, tried, jailed, or put to death. Again, it may be that the Spaniards incited the Indians to slay the English.”

Spain wanted to maintain control of the land and riches of the Western Hemisphere.

*What about that idea?*

*Research in the archives in Seville, Spain, indicates that Spain felt seriously threatened by reports of English colonization in the late 1500s. The Spanish searched for the settlement in 1588, but they believed it was on the Chesapeake Bay and so did not find it. They were still searching in 1600, indicating that they never knew about the Roanoke Island colony.*

**Did They Drown at Sea?**

Historians Hugh Talmage Lefler and Albert Ray Newsome wrote in their 1954 book *North Carolina: The History of a Southern State*: “One of the most plausible theories . . . is that the group, finally despairing of relief, sailed for England in a boat which had been left with them by White in 1587, and were lost in the Atlantic.”

The colonists had a small ship, called a pinnace, left for them to use after John White sailed back to England.

*What about that idea?*

*Other historians argue that the colonists did not have a ship large enough to carry the whole group back to England. Some people, at least, would have had to remain at Roanoke.*

**Did They Split Up?**

Historians Christopher Crittenden, William S. Powell, and David Beers Quinn in 1959 developed a theory based on the scanty evidence. They suggested that some or all of the colonists moved to Croatoan. At least some of them went on to the Chowan River area or the south side of the Chesapeake Bay. In addition, some may have traveled south toward Robeson County.

Powhatan probably did kill many of the colonists, particularly the men. Native Americans often spared the lives of women and children, incorporating them into their communities. Most probably some colonists remained alive—but unfound—when the English settled Jamestown in 1607.

*What about that idea?*

*Dividing the colonists into smaller groups allows for more possible endings to the Lost Colony story. The settlers may have been safer from attack if they had stayed together. But it would have been difficult to feed such a large group if they had to live off the land.*
Is Virginia Dare Pocahontas? Her Sister? Her Mother?

In 1906 Frances Elizabeth Scott Bagby suggested in *Southern Magazine* that Powhatan’s forces murdered the colonists but spared the life of Virginia Dare. Powhatan then adopted her as his daughter. Later newspaper accounts echoed this theory.

Other researchers claim that some Roanoke islanders believe that Powhatan spared the life of Virginia’s mother, Elenor Dare, and married her. Their daughter, Virginia’s half sister, was Pocahontas.

Mary Virginia Wall suggested in her 1908 novel *The Daughter of Virginia Dare* that Powhatan captured and married Virginia Dare herself. She gave birth to Pocahontas and soon died.

What about that idea?

Virginia Dare as Pocahontas? The dates are wrong. Virginia Dare would have been twenty years old when Jamestown was founded, but John Smith described Pocahontas as a young girl about ten years of age. To be Pocahontas’s mother, Virginia Dare would have had to give birth between ages eight and twelve. Could Elenor Dare be Pocahontas’s mother? It seems unlikely that Powhatan could have concealed her English identity. Individuals and communities in Powhatan’s confederacy would have known the situation, and such an interesting story would probably have reached the Jamestown colonists.