



A Cash Crop for Virginia

Officials of the Virginia Company established the colony at Jamestown to make a profit. They expected the colonists to find marketable natural resources, develop industries or produce an agricultural product that would succeed in making money for the colony and its investors in England. After finding no precious metals and failing at such endeavors as glassmaking and silk production, John Rolfe finally succeeded by growing a sweet variety of tobacco which was all the rage in England. In other words, consumers were waiting! It didn't take the colonists long to realize that economic specialization would be the way to go, and tobacco became the *cash crop* for the colony.

In 1616, John Rolfe visited England with his indigenous wife Rebecca (Pocahontas) where she was introduced to English royalty. In spite of the popularity of “the weed” in London, Rolfe probably knew better than to smoke a pipe in front of King James I as it was well-known that the king was vehemently opposed to tobacco.

Learning activity

In small groups (one representing the king and his advisors, another representing Rolfe and the Virginia Company Board and others representing various London newspapers) prepare for a press conference in which the reporters can ask questions of King James and John Rolfe.

The following information may be helpful in preparing questions or preparing to answer them.

King James I – King James became king of England in 1603 after the death of Queen Elizabeth I of England. Queen Elizabeth had no children, so her cousin, James of Scotland, became king. King James I was not an absolute monarch, because an elected House of Commons had responsibility for raising money necessary to operate the English government. In spite of this, King James I had great power as a king. In 1606 King James I granted the Virginia Company of London a charter to establish a colony in Virginia. The hope was that the colony would furnish valuable raw materials to England so they would not have to be purchased from other countries. The colony would then become a market for England's manufactured goods. King James himself was rather sickly, having crippling arthritis, weak limbs, abdominal colic, gout and a number of other chronic illnesses. In 1604, he wrote, *A Counterblaste to Tobacco*, which stated his strong feelings about the weed and introduced a massive tax on importing tobacco. His disapproval did not halt the popularity of tobacco. Instead consumption of tobacco in England increased dramatically.

John Rolfe – John Rolfe left England bound for Jamestown in May 1609. He was aboard the ship *Sea Venture* which was the flagship of a nine-ship convoy of 500 settlers. In July, a hurricane blew several of the ships off course. The *Sea Venture* ran aground on a reef off Bermuda, but the entire company of 150 safely reached shore in the ship's boats. John Rolfe and his wife had a daughter who was born and died on Bermuda. His wife passed away either before or shortly after reaching Virginia. Once in Virginia, John Rolfe experimented with the planting of tobacco seeds he obtained from somewhere in the Caribbean. He gave some tobacco from his crop to friends, and they agreed that the new leaf was very pleasant and better than the Indian tobacco. He shipped the remainder of his crop to England where it compared favorably with “Spanish” leaf. At about this same time, Pocahontas, daughter of Powhatan, paramount chief of the Indians in Tidewater Virginia, was kidnapped and brought to Jamestown. John Rolfe eventually married her in 1614. Their marriage coincided with a temporary peace with the Indians, allowing the settlers to develop and expand their colony, including planting more tobacco. In 1616 he took his wife and infant son to England. Pocahontas, now known by her Christian name of Rebecca, was introduced to English royalty. It was here that she died and their son remained under the care of a guardian in England. Upon Rolfe's return to Jamestown, he became a member of the House of Burgesses and continued his efforts to improve the quality and quantity of tobacco in Virginia.