

# What Happened to the Lost Colony?



## Background Information

About 37 years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, the first colony was established in the New World. It was the colony at Roanoke.

Sir Walter Raleigh, an English explorer and writer, had an interest in helping England colonize the New World. In 1584, Raleigh paid two English navigators to explore the possibility of setting up a colony in the New World. These navigators were Philip Amadas and Arthur Barlowe. They found an island right off the coast of North Carolina. Within days these explorers met with friendly American Indians. Amadas and Barlowe noticed that the ground seemed fertile and recommended it for colonization. They took two American Indians, Wanchese and Manteo, back to England. The expedition greatly impressed both Raleigh and the queen and they named the land Virginia in honor of the "Virgin Queen." Queen Elizabeth I gave a grant for the land, and the next year more than 100 men set sail with Raleigh's cousin, Sir Richard Grenville.

The American Indians on Roanoke Island welcomed the men. A spot at the north end of the island was chosen and the men began building a fort and cottage-like homes using bricks and thatched roofs. Grenville returned to England to tell of their success and to get more supplies. Ralph Lane was appointed governor and left in charge of the colony.

Unknown to Grenville, these new settlers soon faced serious problems. To begin with, the men landed too late to plant crops. They had to rely on the American Indians for food. Friendships with the American Indians became strained when the settlers kidnapped them in exchange for information. In return, the settlers' fish traps were repeatedly robbed or destroyed. In desperation, groups of men were sent to the shore to search for seafood and ships. By the beginning of June, the settlers were at war with the American Indians, and some American Indians died in the conflicts.

Unfortunately, Grenville's trip back to the colony was delayed. The settlers were desperate. On June 9, word was brought to Lane that Sir Francis Drake was on the coast with 23 ships. Drake offered a ship filled with supplies to Lane. Lane was told that he and the men could take this ship back to England in a month, or they could return immediately with Drake himself. Lane hated the idea of giving up this colony, but he realized that his men were in desperate need and could no longer survive. He agreed to take the ship and sail back a month later. In the meantime, the ship was blown out to sea in a terrible storm. It did not return. Drake offered him another ship, but Lane and his men decided to sail immediately with Drake. On June 18, all of the colonists set sail for England.



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A short while later, Grenville arrived back at the colony with three loaded ships. He searched in vain for the settlers and decided to leave 15 men behind to keep the land for England. He left the men with enough supplies to last two full years.

In 1587, Raleigh decided to set up another settlement. This time he sent several families, including women and children. He also appointed John White to be the governor. The settlers intended to go to the Chesapeake Bay area, thinking it would be a better place to settle. On their way, the crew stopped at the island to pick up the 15 men who were left behind by Grenville. No one was found except the remains of one man, obviously slaughtered by the American Indians. The cottage-like houses were still standing, but the fort had been destroyed completely. The crew assumed that all the men had been killed.

Perhaps because it was already late in the season (July), White decided to stay in the old settlement instead of pushing on to the Chesapeake Bay area. Not long after, one of the men was found murdered, presumably by the Roanoke Island Indians (also called Roanokes). Manteo relayed the information that the Roanokes lived in a village on the mainland, and so the Englishmen formed a raiding party and attacked the village. After the attack, the Englishmen discovered that the Roanokes had already fled and the victims in the village were the friendly Croatoans, who were gathering the spoils. At the time, Manteo was able to patch up this misunderstanding between the English and the Croatoans. It is unknown for sure whether the Croatoans actually forgave the settlers.

At the end of August, Governor White left for England to gather more supplies. Before he had left, he devised a code for the settlers to use if they had to leave the island. They were to pick a tree and carve on it the destination where they were going. If they were in distress, they were to carve a Maltese cross over the destination. Unfortunately, White left at a bad time. Upon arriving back in England, a war had broken out between the English and the Spanish. All of the ships were needed for battle. For over two years, the settlers had no contact with White or England.



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Finally, in 1590, White was able to sail back. When he arrived at the settlement, he noticed that the homes had been torn down. The village had been heavily fenced with large trees so that it looked like a fort. White noticed that the letters "CRO" had been carved on one of the trees. On one of the fence posts the word "Croatoan" had been carved, but there was not a Maltese cross. White assumed that the settlers had gone to the Croatoan Island. He and the crew made their way back to the ship and planned to go to the island the next day. Unfortunately, a terrible storm kept them from the island, so they tried to sail to the West Indies for supplies. Instead of landing, a hurricane blew them out to sea, and they were forced to sail back to England. White was never again able to raise money to travel to America.

So what happened to the colony of Roanoke, which consisted of more than 100 men, women, and children? In the summer of 1588, the Spanish had sent a scouting party to Roanoke. They did not report any findings. In other words, they did not see any people or remains of people. In 1607, Jamestown was established. An American Indian chief here boasted of killing the Roanoke colonists. In 1709, John Lawson spent time exploring an area inhabited by descendants of the Croatoan tribe. He claimed that many of the natives were white people. He also said that some of them had gray eyes, something not heard of among the American Indians. In the 1880s, it was noted by a man living in southeastern North Carolina that the American Indians there looked very European, with fair skin and light hair and eyes. In 1998 archaeologists analyzed the tree rings where the colony once stood. The tree rings seem to suggest that there was a severe drought in the area around 1587. In fact, it was the worst drought in 800 years! This would have caused food to be in short supply, too.

All this evidence suggests a few ideas: either the neighboring American Indians killed the settlers; or the settlers died from a drought; or they assimilated into a tribe, possibly on the Croatoan Island. Maybe there are other possibilities. Only the island knows the truth—and it's not talking!

