

EXPANSION OF SETTLEMENT IN EARLY VIRGINIA

Jamestown was the first English settlement in Virginia, but the English did not stay confined in James Fort for very long. Within a few years, other settlements had been established by the Virginia Company. In the years 1611 to 1613, protected settlements were started at healthier locations up and down the James River—Kecoughtan at the mouth of the James, and Henrico and Bermuda Hundred upriver close to the fall line. At certain periods during those years, the population was larger in those “towns” than at the capital in Jamestown. By 1616, John Rolfe listed five areas of settlement along the James River and one on the Eastern Shore.

Settlement expanded again after 1616. Under the 1609 charter, the second one granted to the Virginia Company by King James I, Englishmen and women who bought shares of stock in the Company were promised that after seven years they would see a return on their investments. But by 1616 the Virginia Company had not made any profits. They did have land for the granting, however, so those individuals who had bought stock, as well as those who had ventured their lives to the colony became landowners at 100 acres per share. Some individuals pooled the acreage they received and formed large plantations. These plantations began to appear up and down the James River. Landowners often recruited servants or tenant farmers to work the land and grow tobacco. Under a new land policy established in 1618, public lands were set aside for the support of Company officials and churches.

The headright system established in this new land policy also stimulated settlement. Under this system, which lasted throughout the colonial period, immigrants who paid their own transportation to the colony, as well as that of anyone else, could claim 50 acres per person or “head” after they had lived in the colony for three years. This right could be used by the recipient, sold, or transferred. Individuals sometimes transported friends and relatives into Virginia in order to claim their headrights.

Before planters could legally claim new property they needed to get a survey that gave the precise description of the location and boundaries of the land. After a claimant showed proof of paying passage for a headright, a court clerk certified a commissioned surveyor to run off the 50 acres selected by the claimant. Then a patent was prepared and signed by the governor. Within the next three years, a person had to build a house and clear and plant at least one acre of land in order to keep rights to it.

Prior to 1622, settlement spread quickly up and down the James River with little regard to Indian rights to the land, pushing them away from the fertile James River valley that had been their home. The Powhatan Indians reacted to this spread in 1622 by beginning a war with the English that lasted ten years. The war put upriver English communities at risk, and colonial authorities preferred to strengthen existing settlements rather than create new ones. For awhile, settlement expanded very slowly.

When peace was achieved in 1632, however, the English began to move north into the Middle Peninsula. The colonial government made attempts to protect lands that had been designated for the Indians, in order to avoid additional trouble between Indians and settlers. In the decade after 1632 colonists claimed most of the land between the James and the York Rivers, and started slowly moving north towards the Rappahannock River as well, but not going west of the fall line. Much of this land was claimed by wealthy planters who had succeeded with tobacco in the early years of the colony.

With the expansion in the 1630s, the General Assembly organized the colony into counties. Counties were established as the result of economic and political pressure, as settlers needed access to courts and county seats to maintain justice and transact business. When the population reached 5000 in 1634, the Assembly organized eight counties, each with a court of justices named by the governor. The county seat became the focus of life. Courts created and maintained public roads and monitored the operation of taverns and mills. They tried most civil cases, collected taxes and probated wills.

This latest expansion helped trigger a new war with the Powhatans in 1644. Defeat of the Indians by 1646, however, opened up most of Tidewater Virginia to the spread of English settlement, and growth came rapidly again. In the 1650s and 1660s settlement progressed north to the Potomac River and moved just west of the fall line, focusing on the Northern Neck. John Washington, the great-grandfather of George, was one of the settlers in this region, arriving in that area in 1656.

Counties were formed in these new settlement areas, as well as being formed by subdividing earlier ones, as the population grew. But by 1670 European immigration to Virginia began to slow down. The price of tobacco had dropped, there was fighting with Indians on the colony’s frontier, and no new counties were formed for two decades. By 1700 there were 23 counties. However, only one extended beyond the fall line. No settlements went beyond the Piedmont region (west of the Blue Ridge Mountains).

Mapping and surveying the new land claims was important in knowing what lands were available and in settling disputes. Governor Berkeley, in the mid-17th century, sponsored the exploration of the western part of Virginia and sought to establish Virginia’s boundaries with respect to neighboring colonies. However, the practical difficulties associated with mapping large tracts of wilderness meant that no accurate map of the whole colony was produced in the 17th century.

Westward settlement did not resume again until after 1720. At that time settlement moved into southwest Virginia and the Piedmont area began to be settled as planters looked for virgin soil. German immigrants began to move into the Shenandoah Valley west of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

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