New world, new culture

The first permanent settlement in Jamestown, Virginia, brought together three distinct cultures—European, African and Virginia Indian—which has helped to shape the cultural diversity of America, and create a new national identity. By David Hogge

When the Virginia Company of London received its charter in 1606 from the newly crowned King James I, it had two distinct goals. One, under the direction of its treasurer Sir Thomas Smith, was to establish an English colony in what they called the "New World." A second goal, which may have been more pressing for some than the first, was to bring a profit for shareholders. As a joint stock company, the Virginia Company of London sold shares at a cost of £12 10s, yet dire financial conditions turned the business of settling Virginia into a dismal failure for investors. The shorelines were not, they discovered, lined with gold, nor were there gems hanging from the trees.

But as for establishing a settlement in Virginia, that goal was successful. England now had a foothold in the Americas. Merchants established trade with other countries. Early industries such as glass manufacture, tar and pitch production, and wine-making took advantage of the land's natural resources and fertility. But more vital than these achievements was the fact that three distinct cultures—European,
African and Virginia Indian—came together to create cultural interaction and establish patterns that continue to echo through today's society.

**Cultural diversity: European, African and Virginia Indian**

Relations between these cultures were often difficult. Trading agreements between the English and the Virginia Indians often turned hostile and destructive, leading to cycles of conflict. And the arrival of the "20 and odd" Africans in 1619 planted the seeds of slavery, which became an enduring blight on the soul of this new country. But despite a landscape seemingly richer in exploitation than gold and gems, America grew stronger and each culture contributed to the new country being born.

Virginia's riches were found in the goods it produced and traded—tobacco, sugar and other staples—and this "empire of goods" created opportunities for merchants and retailers to establish themselves in a new social class they never would have achieved at home in England. Social mobility, thanks to changing personal fortunes, became a distinctly American trait. People were even granted the privilege of owning private property.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this settlement was the practice of representative government. From July 30 to August 4, 1619, the first representative legislative assembly in the Americas met in Jamestown's church. This new and distinct political culture would eventually appear at other English colonies along the East Coast. While the initial outcomes of this legislative gathering were modest, this first assembly gave birth to a new era in colonial government.

Over the years, it would eventually blossom into a fully developed constitutional system designed to preserve peace and order and to fuse diverse cultures into a single nation.

When the English settled in Jamestown in 1607, the Powhatan population in eastern Virginia, numbered around 14,000. Many of the English viewed Indian culture as primitive and savage. However, commentaries on the native culture, >
especially those provided by John Smith, reveal a people whose use of land and resources reflected a sense of stewardship uncharacteristic of the English.

Whether hunting or farming, the Powhatans approached these life-sustaining activities as steward of the natural world. Hunting, to them, was the means to secure food and clothing, not the recreational activity it was for the English.

The Powhatans’ treatment of the land, as seen in their farming, also distinguished them from the English. Like other Algonquian tribes, the Powhatans did not fertilize their fields so, every few years, they would move their homes to newly cleared sites. The old fields would be used later by anyone who wanted them, but they felt this land remained in the stewardship of the tribe. This land produced food for all to share, which was a concept that differed from the English concept of land ownership.

The story of Virginia is also a story shaped by African people and culture. While 1619 marks the first documented arrival of Africans in this new settlement, it was not until the late 1600s, when the supply of European indentured servants declined, that tobacco farmers relied increasingly on enslaved Africans. These men and women, who arrived in America from west, central and east Africa speaking different languages, eventually developed a distinct dialect and introduced a unique culture.

By the time Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, Africans represented 40 percent of Virginia’s population. From the time of the Jamestown settlement, African customs and traditions became part of the American culture. Food and cooking, music and dance, religion, medical practices, folklore—the contributions of African culture were as vast and varied 400 years ago as they are today.

Cultural interaction was a force behind Jamestown’s permanence as a settlement, and the convergence of European, African and Native American people and ideas forged the beginning of a national identity like no other.

It is the American identity.