Roanoke’s Achievement

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The following article is the text of a lecture given by Dr. Kupperman, a leading American history scholar, at Jamestown Settlement on July 19 in connection with the special exhibition, “A New World: England’s First View of America.”

In the middle of the 1580s when English leaders first became interested in founding a permanent American presence, they were conscious that their country was far behind Spain and Portugal in these endeavors. This is not to say that England had not been involved in American ventures; English fishermen had been making annual voyages to the Newfoundland coast for decades. David Beers Quinn even argued that they may have discovered that portion of the American continents by 1481, a decade before Columbus’s historic voyage.1 English fishermen continued to play a leading role in the voyages that brought protein to Europe’s burgeoning population. Fishing was an ideal trade because it did not require maintenance of expensive year-round occupation. The ships came in the spring and departed with their loads of partially dried fish in the fall.2

But by the mid-1580s, there were new reasons for interest in the much more expensive option of a permanent base—and this new interest focused on the south coast. The geopolitical situation had changed dramatically in the middle of the 1580s as tensions between Spain and England, the self-styled leader of the Protestant nations, threatened to erupt into open war. In anticipation of such a rupture, Walter Raleigh, a handsome young courtier, sent a reconnoitering voyage to the Carolina Outer Banks in the summer of 1584. Raleigh’s principal goal was to find a site for a base from which English ships could attack the great heavy ships that carried New World treasure from Havana to Seville in convoy every summer. Roanoke Island, close to the Florida channel by which sailing ships exit the Caribbean but sheltered behind the Carolina Outer Banks, seemed to be ideal for these purposes.

The Anglo-Spanish War was fought in the Atlantic. The relatively poor English government had no plans to mount a royal navy; this war was fought entirely by private enterprise through government-issued licenses for privateering through which merchants could recoup losses they had suffered by Spanish actions. In theory such a license was controlled and limited, but in reality those who possessed them attacked all shipping. Roanoke was intended to offer rest and refitting to ships involved in privateering and to allow them to stay year-round in the Atlantic sheltered away from its furious storms.

Spain, for its part, claimed all of the North American coast and had no desire to see an English presence there. The Spanish had planted St. Augustine in Florida, the first permanent European settlement within North America, in 1565. They had already eliminated a Protestant French settlement on the northern Florida coast. Florida governor Pedro Menéndez de Avilés wrote to the Spanish king Philip II that he had ‘made war with fire and blood’ upon the Protestants who had ‘come to these parts to settle and to plant this evil Lutheran sect.’ 3

Map of the coast of Virginia, John White, ca. 1585, copyright Trustees of the British Museum.
So, Ralegh and his supporters knew that settling a colony in the Carolina Outer Banks was risky. But the rewards would be correspondingly great if ships based there could capture one of the great laden carracks. And they could assure themselves that not only were they recompensing English merchants and sailors for prior losses, but they were only seizing wealth that the Spanish had extorted from the suffering Indians. The first English translation of Bishop Bartolomeo Las Casas’s depiction of Spanish cruelties toward the Indians was published in 1583 with the title The Spanish Colonie. And in 1584 Richard Hakluyt, the great promoter of an English global presence, wrote his Discourse of Western Planting.

Hakluyt argued that the Spanish were weakened by their own corruption, and that vigorous action now could deprive them of the income that supported their campaign to harry Europe’s Protestants back into the Roman Catholic fold. ‘I may therefore conclude this matter with comparinge the Spaniardes unto a dromme or an emptie vessel, which when it is smitten upon yeldeth a greate and terrible sounde and that a farr of, but come nere and look into them there is nothing yn them, or rather like unto the asse which wrapte himself in a lyon’s skin and marched farr of to strike terrour into the hartes of the other beastes, but when the foxe drewe nere he perceaved his longe ears and made him a iest unto all the beastes of the forrest. In like manner wee (upon perril of my life) shall make the Spaniarde ridiculous to all Europe, if with percing eyes wee see into his contemptible weakenes in the west Indies, and with true stile painte hym oute ad vivum unto the worlde in his fainte colours.’

Hakluyt argued that the Indians were ripe for uprising and would welcome the English as liberators: ‘The Spaniardes have exercised moste outragious and more then Turkishe cruelties in all the west Indies, whereby they are every where there becomme moste odious unto them whoe would ioyne with us or any other moste willinglye to shake of their moste intollerable yoke, and have begonne to doe yt already in divers places where they were lorde heretofore. So many and so monstrous have bene the Spanishe cruelties, suche strange slaughters and murders of those peaceable, lowly, milde, and gentle people together with the spoiles of Townes, provinces, and kingdomes which have bene moste ungodly perpetrated in the west Indies, as also divers others no lesse terrible matters, that to describe the leaste parte of them woulde require more then one chapter especially where there are whole booke extant in printe not only of straungers but also even of their owne countruye men (as of Bartholomew de Las Casas a Bishopp in Nova Spania), yea suche and so passinge straunge and excedinge all humanitie and moderation have they bene that the very rehersall of them drave divers of the cruell Spanishe which had not bene in the west Indies, into a kind of extasye and maze...’

The Roanoke colony was designed to be a privateering base, and the group of 100-plus men under military control who made up the first colony in 1585 were clearly chosen for that purpose. Queen Elizabeth released Captain Ralph Lane from service as commander of the garrisons at Clannorris and Kerry in Ireland so that he could go to America as governor. The queen also donated her own ship, the Tiger, as the fleet’s flagship. Unfortunately the Tiger ran aground as the ships neared the Outer Banks and almost all the food supplies were spoiled. This was an inauspicious beginning for the proposed base, as the colonists would now be utterly dependent on the Indians for their food over the coming winter. So when Sir Francis Drake called at the island the next spring ready to refresh and resupply his fleet, he found the colonists desperate to return home. They had just preemptively attacked the Roanoke Indians, fearing a conspiracy on the Americans’ part, and their position had become untenable.

So, Roanoke’s founding as an English colony had at least as much to do with European politics as it did with interest in America. The quest was both to weaken the Spanish and to enhance English power through the discovery of rich commodities or of a passage through to the Pacific—or both.

But that was not the whole story. Ralegh was England’s Renaissance man as well as a leader in the nation’s development. As Ralegh approached his first American project, he saw it as a chance to expand European knowledge as well as England’s power and the failed 1585-6 colony was a triumph in that field.

The captains of the 1584 reconnaissance, Philip Amadas and Arthur Barlowe, had come home full of enthusiasm. In his published account Barlowe praised the land, saying ‘I thinke in all the world the like aboundance is not to be founde.’ and he mentioned that he had seen the most abundant parts of Europe, probably including the Levant. He recklessly compared the Carolina coast to the Garden of Eden: ‘The earth bringeth forth all things in abundance, as in the first creation, without toil or labor.’

Amadas and Barlowe brought home two young men from the Outer Banks, Manteo and Wanchese, and Ralegh’s science advisor, the recent Oxford graduate Thomas Harriot, worked with them over the winter of 1584-85 to learn some coastal Carolina Algonquian and to teach them some English. With this training,
Harriot prepared himself for the task for creating a full natural history of America in collaboration with the painter John White. Wanchese abandoned the English as soon as the fleet carrying the 1585 colony arrived, but Manteo, whose home at Croatoan was farther south in the Outer Banks, remained with them. John White's portfolio of paintings and Harriot's Briefe and True Report are the result of the three-way partnership of these men who produced an unparalleled American record.

Manteo does not speak in his own voice in the documents, but his shaping role can be seen both in Harriot's text and in the paintings, and we can assume that his willingness to stay with the colonists and to help them grew out of his perception that he could thus act as agent for his own people's interests. One quality that makes the White-Manteo-Harriot record unique is the access to coastal Carolina Algonquian domestic life afforded these Europeans.

We see Indian women caring for their children, and men and women growing and preparing food and eating in homely scenes. White's portrait of a mother and her young daughter even contains an example of cross-cultural exchange, as the girl holds an Elizabethan doll. Another portrait depicts an aged man.

Such access was not allowed to other English venturers, who mainly saw men and who saw even them mostly in ceremonial or adversarial settings.

Manteo's intervention made it possible for White and Harriot to understand the coastal Carolina Algonquians as civil people. Civil life was characterized by three organizational principles in European thought: government and law; religion; and settled life showing care for the morrow. Those who lived a nomadic way of life could not be fully civil. Anyone who saw John White’s painting of the town of Secoton or the engraving of it created in the workshop of Theodor DeBry with its neat and abundant agricultural fields, its depiction of the Green Corn ceremony, and its houses organized along a central lane could only draw the conclusion that these people were fully civil. As the author of a 1655 book on Maryland remarked, Algonquian towns resembled ‘Countrey villages in England.’

Harriot's Briefe and True Report and Philip Amadas’s report on the reconnoitering voyage developed the message that White’s village paintings presented. Amadas and Barlowe carefully scrutinized relationships between Indians, and were gratified to observe the great respect accorded leaders and the order the Americans observed in trading with the English. One question that puzzled Europeans was whether the Indians could have law without written records, and Harriot assured his readers that the coastal Carolina Algonquians had institutionalized a system of memorization through which they retained their own history and remembered their law. In this, of course, their practice resembled the English system of customary law. He also gave a list of the crimes they recognized and the punishments for each.
White’s paintings reinforced the argument that Indian leaders were worthy of respect. He painted an Indian leader standing in the posture of an aristocratic European, one hand on his hip and one foot forward with the other hand holding a weapon. This proud stance was reserved for the most high-ranking men in European portraiture and Harriot’s caption to the engraving of this figure identified him as one of “The Princes of Virginia.” White also painted the Roanoke chief Wingina and the wives of two chiefs in separate portraits. Wingina and the wife of an unnamed chief were standing with folded arms, and Harriot’s caption to the engravings said ‘they fold their armes together as they walke, or as they talke one with another in signe of wisdome.’ Wingina’s wife stood with her arms on her shoulders in a self-enclosing gesture; her entwined legs completed the mannerist posture.

The English were particularly interested in how distinctions of all kinds were displayed. Postures, badges of office, tattooing and jewelry, and hair styling were all recorded with very great care; they were important not only because of the information embedded in them, but also because their existence demonstrated that the Indians maintained such distinctions as carefully as Europeans did. Barlowe observed that important men wore ‘redde peeces of copper on their heads’ and that these badges indicated ‘the difference betweene the Noble men and Governours of Countries, and the meaner sort.’ Harriot observed different emblems; ‘in token of authoritie, and honor,’ he wrote, the ‘cheefe men’ wore ‘a chaine of great pears, or copper beades or smoother bones aboue their necks, and a plate of copper [hung] upon a stringe.’ Every man indicated his allegiance by tattoos, ‘Wherby yt may be known what Princes subjects they bee, or of what place they have their originall.’ White painted a picture of a man with such a tattoo on his back and surrounded him by all the marks of this kind they had seen.

So, the Indians clearly passed the first test for civility: they had orderly government, and they were led by admirable men who deserved the respect they commanded. White and Harriot’s collaboration also clearly indicated that coastal Carolina Algonquian culture met the test of living in settled towns and storing food for the morrow. Harriot’s Briefe and True Report discussed many Indian crops in detail, and was careful to give the native name for every plant he described.

Agriculture was one subject on which the visual report and the written did not match. John White painted the village of Secoton with its neat fields of rows of maize in three stages of growth and the engraving made from this painting added separate beds of sunflowers, beans, and pumpkins. Those who saw the painting or the engraving would have been gratified to see an idealized version of European-style agriculture. But Harriot’s text presented an agricultural regime that was closer to American realities, as he described planting corn in hills with nitrogen-fixing beans around the cornstalks: “Then their setting or sowing is after this maner. First for their corne, beginning in one corner of the plot, with a pecker they make a hole, wherein they put foure graines with that care they touch not one another, (about an inch asunder) and couer them with the moulde againe: and so through out the whole plot, making such holes and vsing them after such maner: but with this regard that they bee made in rankes, euery ranke differing from other halfe a fadome or a yarde, and the holes also in euery ranke, as much. By this meanes there is a yarde spare ground betwene euery hole: where according to discretion here and there, they set as many Beanes and Peaze: in diuers places also among the seedes of Macocqwer, Melden and Planta Solis.”

Using these methods, an English acre yielded ‘at the least two hundred London bushelles’ of corn and legumes, not counting other plants such as sunflowers and pumpkins [Macocqwer], whereas ‘in England fourtie bushelles of our wheate yeelded out of such an acre is thought to be much.’ Harriot was particularly enthusiastic about maize, whose yield he considered miraculous: ‘a graine of marveillous great increase; of a thousand, fiftene hundred and some two thousand fold.”
Peter Stallybrass has recently argued that the dialogue between text and image continued as engravers and painters in the Frankfort workshop of Theodor DeBry transformed White's paintings into copperplate images. For example, DeBry added examples of the foods described by Harriot as forming the basic American diet to his picture of a man and woman eating.

And in his engraving of the village of Secoton, DeBry depicted the growing corn without husks so that his meticulously colored books could show the corn as Harriot described it: ‘The graine is about the bignesse of our ordinary English peaze and not much different in forme and shape: but of divers colours: some white, some red, some yellow, and some blew.’

Stallybrass also points out that the illuminators who colored the Latin version of De Bry's 1590 edition owned by the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Virginia, drew on Harriot's book as they painted the hair of selected individuals with bright red or orange color. This seemingly eccentric choice, he argues, shows that the DeBry added information from Harriot's text to the paintings sent them by White.

Dyes were of prime importance to the English textile industry and overseas ventures were always looking for them. Harriot wrote that the Indians had ‘the seede of an hearbe called Wasewórr, little small rootes called Cháppacor, and the barke of the tree called by the inhabitaunts Tangómockomindge; which Dies are for divers sortes of red: their goodnesse for our English clothes remayne yet to be proved. The inhabitants use them onely for the dying of hayre, and colouring of their faces, and Mantles made of Deare skinnes’ and also for baskets and mats.13

Not only did the Indians meet the first two tests of civility–having government and law and living in settled villages with an agricultural regime–but these documents also clearly showed them as recognizing God and pursuing a relationship with the divine through organized religion. Harriot believed that their observances made them ripe for conversion to Christianity. Manteo's role was crucial in giving the English access to this aspect of American life, an opening denied to later observers, and Harriot affirmed that he had had 'special familiarity with some of their priestes.'

Sophisticated Europeans were eager to learn about other religions, including Islam and American Indian practices. Harriot recovered an American creation story: the ‘one onely chiefe and great God, which hath bene from all eternitie’ first created lesser gods to help in shaping the creation. On earth the waters were made first, and then creatures ‘visible or invisible.’ The first human being was a woman ‘which by the working of one of the goddes, conceived and brought forth children.’

Many of John White's paintings portrayed religious themes. He painted two religious leaders. One was a priest, who conducted worship ceremonies. Harriot's caption described him as older--'well stricken in yeers’ and 'as yt seemeth of more experience then the comon sorte.' Harriot also recorded that priests were 'no- table enchaunters.' The other man with access to the supernatural realm painted by White was a young man, identified as 'The flyer' or 'The conjuror.' The conjurors, or 'juglers,' were 'verye familiar with devils,' who enabled them to foretell the future and gave them information about the activities of their enemies. Their followers believed in them because their predictions so often proved true. White also painted two religious ceremonies. One, probably the Green Corn ceremony, both as a separate painting and in his depiction of the town of Secoton, clearly indicated to European viewers that the Indians' worship involved corporate and structured forms.

Harriot wrote that these ceremonies drew people from neighboring towns. He also wrote that they offered tobacco, Uppówoc, to their gods with 'strange gestures, uttering therewithal and chattering strange words & noises.' and 'they thinke their gods are marvelously delighted therwith.'

Manteo's collaboration with Harriot and White also allowed the Englishmen to present American mortuary customs with a depiction of a temple which housed the preserved bones of their 'Weroans or cheefe lorde's.' Harriot's caption described the methods by which the flesh was removed from the bones, which were kept 'still fastened together with the ligaments whole and uncorrupted.' A priest prayed over the skeletons day and night.

Harriot wrote that the Indians believed in the immortality of the soul and that people went either to 'the habitacle of gods' after death or, if they were wicked, to a great hole in the earth where the sun sets, 'there to burne continually: the place they call Popogusso.' Harriot's and Manteo's linguistic skills were especially useful on these issues, as they learned the stories of two people who had had near-death experiences in which they had visited the afterlife; both had seemed dead and had actually been buried before attendants
saw signs of movement in the soil over the grave. The first, a ‘wicked man,’ said that he had been near Popogusso when one of the gods allowed him to return to the world of the living so that he could ‘teach his friends what they should doe to avoid that terrible place of torment.’ The other reported that he had traveled along a highway bordered by fruit trees until he reached a town of ‘most brave and faire houses,’ where he encountered his father, who instructed him to return, even though he wanted to stay, so that he could urge the people to live in such a way that they could ‘enjoy the pleasures of that place’ after death.14

One reason why Europeans wanted to know about Americans’ religious life was because of the widespread thought that they might be descended from the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. The timing of God’s revelation of the two American continents kept hidden from the Old World for so many centuries indicated to many that they were living in a time of great importance. The knowledge that God had given Adam had been fragmented as peoples became dispersed over the earth. Now, with their ability to study the peoples, plants, and animals of the newly-disclosed continents, intellectuals hoped that they might bring all that knowledge together again. One part of this would be reversing the corruption of human language that had occurred after the Tower of Babel, and Harriot recorded his observations with these goals in mind. He invented a system for recording languages, a syllabary.

Theodor De Bry’s 1590 edition in four languages of Harriot’s Briefe and True Report with his engravings of White’s pictures was a landmark event in the history of Europe’s engagement with America. Although the paintings were largely unknown until modern times, the engravings became the Indians for Europeans through the ensuing centuries. In the eighteenth century, images of the coastal Carolina towns of Secoton and Pomeiooc appeared as Apache villages in a French map of the New Mexico region north of the Rio Grande River.15

Although it was intended as just a taste of the great full natural history Harriot intended to write, the Briefe and True Report was the only book he ever published, and Harriot’s true stature as a Renaissance scientist was not fully known until his papers were studied in modern times. Harriot and White both spent time in Ireland after the 1585 colony came home, and Harriot was finished with personal experience of America. White, however, remained committed to the project of a colony at Roanoke, and this led to the project’s other great achievement: the evolution of the true model of successful colony design.

Ralegh’s second attempt to found a colony in America in 1587 completely scrapped the military outpost model. The new plan resembled the kinds of plantations Ralegh and others were building in Ireland. It was nothing less than an attempt to create a new society, an idealized model of English society. The company centered on complete families, and David Beers Quinn suggested that they may have included puritans.16 John White went as governor, and the colonists included his married daughter Eleanor Dare, and her husband, Ananias. Their daughter, Virginia Dare, was born shortly after the colony arrived. These families were promised substantial landholdings of their own, and they were directed to settle on Chesapeake Bay, the destination of the Jamestown colonists twenty years later. The dimensions of the changed intentions were signalled by the name applied to the new venture. It was patented as ‘the Cittie of Raleigh in Virginiea’ and Ralegh arranged for its governor and council to receive grants of arms.17

Settling families on land of their own was the only colonial model that actually worked in English America, but this knowledge was hard won. Roanoke was abandoned by Ralegh as England faced the great Spanish Armada. All national resources were commandeered for the defense of the nation. Spain’s decision to confront England was, of course, a response to the increased level of privateering that Roanoke had been designed to support.

No English person ever saw the final group of colonists again, so the lessons of their experiences were also lost. We now know the region endured massive environmental stress during the colony’s first three years.
Tree ring studies of living thousand-year-old bald cypress trees show that 1587 was the first year of the most severe three years of drought of the past 800 years. When they arrived, the colonists approached Manteo’s Croatoans, the only group that had not been alienated by the 1585 colony. White wrote that they ‘came unto us, embracing and entertaining us friendly, desiring us not to gather or spill any of their corne, for that they had but little.’ It would not be possible for the colonists to rely on food supplies from the Indians as the 1585 group had. And if things were bad in 1587, they would have been much worse in ensuing years with each successive bad harvest.18

El Niño may also have helped determine the final colony’s fate. Historical climatologists have suggested that there may have been a severe El Niño in 1590, which is the year John White was finally able to get back to the Outer Banks to try to find the colonists. The site of Roanoke was deserted, but they had left evidence that they had departed in orderly fashion and so White assumed they had carried out the plan to move into the interior or up to Chesapeake Bay. They marked a tree with the word CROATOAN, which was Manteo’s home, so White believed that at least some of them had gone south on the Outer Banks. But the ship on which White sailed was driven away by a hurricane, possibly related to El Niño conditions, and the search for the colonists was given up.19

Because the colonists were never recovered, and their experiences were unrecorded by English sources, the lessons of the final Roanoke model were never drawn. Jamestown had to relearn those lessons painfully and slowly; the colony endured a decade of miserable unproductiveness until the Virginia Company was able to make the breakthrough Raleigh had made thirty years before. In 1618, the year of Raleigh’s execution, the company gave up the attempt to control the colony through military government and instead offered land, a degree of self-government, and the chance for normal family life to colonists. With these elements in place, the colony finally began to grow.20

Jamestown’s story makes us realize more clearly the dimensions of the lost opportunity at Roanoke. Had the family-centered colony been supported as Raleigh and White apparently intended, the successful model might have been recognized without the many false starts to come before it emerged again in Jamestown. Even though he was its governor, John White had reluctantly gone home rather than stay with his colony in 1587 because the migrants feared that their place among the many enterprises Raleigh was pursuing might slip. Manteo remained with the planters. White’s role was to urge on the effort to assemble ships, more colonists, and supplies, and apparently this was all well in hand when the Armada threat called forth a stay of all shipping.

Ultimately, John White lived out the rest of his life in Ireland. His last surviving letter was in 1593. He sent Richard Hakluyt, the great compiler of narratives, the account of his 1590 voyage in search of the colonists, and in the letter’s close he lamented his inability to reach them: ‘I would to God my wealth were answerable to my will.’ He wrote that he was finally forced to give up; having done all he could he committed ‘the relief of my discomfitable company the planters in Virginia, to the merciful help of the Almighty, whom I most humbly beseech to helpe & comfort them.’21 The Jamestown colonists heard various rumors about people like them who they hoped were the survivors and descendants of the lost colony. George Percy reported from the first exploring journey up the James River that they had seen ‘a Savage Boy about the age of ten yeeres, which had a head of haire of a perfect yellow and a reasonable white skinne, which is a Miracle amongst all Savages.’22 But neither this boy nor the other rumored Europeans and their children was ever seen again by the newcomers. The abandoned colony remained lost.

4 The Spanish colonie, or Briefe chronicle of the acts and gestes of the Spaniardes in the West Indyes, called the newe world, for the space of xl yeeres: written in the Castilian tongue by the reuerend Bishop Bartholomew de las Cases or Casaus, a friar of the order of S. Dominicke. And nowe first translated into english, by M.M.S. (London, 1583); Richard Hakluyt, A Particuler Discourse concerninge the Greate Necessitie and Manifolde Commodityes that are like to growe to this Realme of Englande by the Westerne Discoveries Lately Attempted, written in the yere 1584, ed. David B. Quinn and Alison M. Quinn (London, 1993), known as The Discourse of Western Planting, quote 52. On the role of key manuscripts see Harold Love, Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England (Oxford, 1995).

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The patent and grants are in Quinn, ed., Roanoke Voyages, II:506-12.


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