Sea Venture Played Key Role
in History of Bermuda, Virginia

By Stephanie Fitzwater
Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation Outreach Education Instructor

The story of Jamestown is well known as a struggle for survival and the pursuit of profit. A lesser known, but nonetheless crucial, chapter in the Jamestown saga involves a ship called the Sea Venture and its 1609 voyage across the Atlantic. Its passengers and their experiences not only altered the fate of Jamestown, but also the history of the world, when they arrived at the islands that would one day become the British overseas territory of Bermuda.

A 300-ton merchant ship, the Sea Venture, was the flagship of a fleet of nine ships that was to bring the largest group of colonists and cargo yet to Jamestown. Among those aboard were Christopher Newport, captain; Sir Thomas Gates, lieutenant governor of Virginia; Sir George Somers, admiral of the fleet; William Strachey, future secretary of the Virginia Company in Jamestown; John Rolfe; and various other names that have since come to be associated with both early Virginia and American history.

The fleet departed England in June of 1609, the third resupply voyage to the Jamestown colony, and took a slightly different and faster route than the original 1607 voyage to avoid the Spanish in the West Indies. While the first seven weeks of the voyage were uneventful, it soon turned into a nightmare. Only a week from Virginia, the fleet sailed into a tempest. The huge storm, probably a hurricane, tossed the ships about on the open ocean, and the Sea Venture became separated from the rest of the fleet. Despite its impressive size, the Sea Venture was no match for Mother Nature.

The force of the hurricane battered the ship, causing multiple leaks to start flooding the hold. Most of the passengers and crew alike believed they were doomed. Nevertheless, all the men on board worked hard to save the dying vessel, pumping out water and even throwing their possessions and cargo overboard. On July 28, 1609, the fourth day of the storm, Sir George Somers spied land. Captain Newport sailed the limping ship as close to the islands as possible and, as he was unable to anchor, wedged the ship between two large rocks. All of the men and women aboard, about 150 in total, survived the wreck and escaped to the shores of Bermuda, known to the English as “The Devil’s Islands.”


For four-and-twenty hours the storm in a restless tumult had blown so exceedingly as we could not apprehend in our imaginations any possibility of greater violence; yet did we still find it not only more terrible but more constant, fury added to fury… Winds and seas were as mad as fury and rage could make them … I had been in some storms before … Yet all that I had ever suffered gathered together might not hold comparison with this: there was not a moment in which the sudden splitting or instant oversetting of the ship was not expected. – William Strachey
For the following nine months, the crew and passengers would forage, fish, hunt and pray for survival and rescue. They found that Bermuda provided plenty of food with its plants and animals, including countless wild hogs probably left by earlier Spanish shipwrecks. However, numerous near-mutinies threatened the castaways on Bermuda. Only the strong leadership and discipline of men like Thomas Gates and George Somers prevented chaos.

After salvaging all they could from the wreck, the group began to construct two small new ships, the Patience and the Deliverance, to carry the survivors the final distance to Jamestown. The Patience was slightly larger than the Godspeed, one of the three ships that brought English colonists to Virginia in 1607, and the Deliverance was slightly larger than the Discovery, smallest of the 1607 ships. At last, on May 10, 1610, the two new ships set sail for Virginia, laden with supplies and all of the survivors but two, mutineers who remained on Bermuda and allowed the English to maintain a claim to the islands. Ten days later the ships sailed into the Chesapeake Bay and made their way toward Jamestown.

The relief and elation the survivors felt gave way to horror and despair when they saw the condition of the Jamestown settlers. Arriving at the end of what is known as the “Starving Time,” they found the fort in shambles and the few remaining settlers hungry and hopeless. The Bermuda survivors soon decided that the situation was futile and chose to abandon Jamestown along with the 60 surviving Jamestown settlers. On June 7, 1610, they fired a final salute and sailed down the James River to make their way home to England.

In this desolation and misery our governor found the condition and state of the colony and (which added more to his grief) no hope how to amend it or save his own company and those yet remaining alive from falling into the like necessities. For we had brought… no greater store of provision… than might well serve… for a sea voyage. And it was not possible at this time of the year to amend it by any help from the Indian… Nor was there at the fort… any means to take fish… All which considered, it pleased our governor to make a speech unto the company… [that] he would make ready and transport them all into their native country… at which there was a general acclamation and shout of joy on both sides, for even our own men began to be disheartened and faint when they saw this misery amongst the others and no less threatened unto themselves. – William Strachey

Before they could even make open water, they met the newly arrived military governor, Lord de la Warr, with his three ships of new settlers and supplies. With new hope, everyone returned to Jamestown, determined to make it succeed.

Using the same discipline in Virginia as the castaway leaders had in Bermuda, the colonists’ fate changed for the better. They found food, security and better organization in the company of such strong leaders. Along with providing guidance, the survivors of the Sea Venture also contributed to the financial success of the Virginia Company. One of them, John Rolfe, planted the tobacco seed he brought and produced the first profitable crop of tobacco by 1614, thus ensuring the success of the colony with his “cash crop.”

Meanwhile, the people who chose to remain on the islands established a permanent residence in Bermuda. It became a supplier of materials to Virginia, thus establishing trade between the two colonies. Over the years Bermuda developed into an overseas territory within the British Commonwealth. The story of the Sea Venture and the founding of Bermuda is in fact a crucial part of American history. Without those who had been aboard the Sea Venture or their experiences in Bermuda, the story of Jamestown and English America may have been very different indeed.