

The Meaning of Jamestown

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In May 1607, three ships completed a many-months long journey that had taken them from England to the Caribbean to the Chesapeake Bay. In May 2007, the monarch of the United Kingdom, after a few hours in a plane, reached much the same destination to help mark the 400 years that had passed since that earlier landing.

Virginians prepared to welcome the queen, and the queen planned on greeting countless Virginians. Those Virginians included members of all three of the great racial communities (themselves variegated) — British and European, African, and Native American — that had become intertwined in that area of the globe in the aftermath of the first landing. What, exactly, was being commemorated, what messages can we glean from the moment, and what alternative understandings might we consider?

Virginia was the “first.” Not the first human settlement of the area, for many thousands of years had already passed since that time. Not the first post-Columbian settlement by Europeans of what came to be known as North America, for the Spanish had taken care of that, especially at St. Augustine. Not the first visit by Europeans to what is now Virginia, for the Spanish had seen to that as well, both west of the Blue Ridge, with an incursion north to Saltville in 1567, and east of the Blue Ridge along the James River, with a mission in 1570. Nor the first visit by the English; Sir Francis Drake’s visit in 1579 to San Francisco was one basis for English claims to a Virginia extending from sea to sea, though an early conception of the continent conflated the Rocky Mountains and the Blue Ridge.

Not even the beginnings of a place named Virginia, for that is best dated to the failed settlement at Roanoke Island in the 1580s, in what is now North Carolina, during the similarly long reign of the first Queen Elizabeth. Not even, one might carp, the beginnings of a permanent settlement in English Virginia; the survivors of the brutal winter of 1609-1610 picked up stakes three years after May 1607 and floated down the river briefly intent on abandoning the colony.

Jamestown’s founding in 1607 came only shortly before the French launched Quebec to the north and the Spanish founded Santa Fe far to the southwest. Quebec, however, has never been a part of the American nation. Santa Fe lay outside the United States until the Mexican War in the 1840s, and Florida, with St. Augustine, also joined the new nation only in the nineteenth century. So the great jousting competition for primacy in marking the origins of American society and the American nation has long taken place between New England, with the Pilgrims’ settlement in Massachusetts Bay in 1620, and Virginia, with its tenuous earlier beginnings near the Chesapeake Bay.

The occasion of the queen’s visit marks a beginning of the first great British Empire, something perhaps far more congenial to the monarchy and her nation than say the 1781 battle at nearby Yorktown, which marked its dissolution. The settlement of Jamestown can be seen as the

launching of what eventually became a great nation on its own account, and the two countries proved to be tremendous allies across the twentieth century.

Yet the ways in which Jamestown has been commemorated over the past century say more about Virginia's changing political and cultural contours than about the origins of Virginia or of the United States of America.

In the run-up to the three-hundredth anniversary, in 1907, a delegation of black Virginians approached the organizers and requested a place in the celebration — and were dismissed on the grounds that the involuntary arrival of a small number of Africans, merely an unfortunate incident that happened twelve years after 1607, had no place on the program. Of course, organizers of Virginia's birthdays every fifty years have cheerfully insisted upon the inclusion of another iconic event from 1619, the convening of the first General Assembly, as the origins of American political democracy. Today's commemoration recognizes early Virginia as representing the beginnings of American slavery as well as American democracy.

When, early in her reign, Elizabeth II came in 1957 for Jamestown 350, she visited a state marked by white supremacy, racial segregation, black disfranchisement — and “massive resistance,” a new policy mandating the closure of any school rather than permitting its racial integration. As early as the 1960s, however, that Virginia began to fade.

At the time of Jamestown 400, Virginia has for decades had black members as well as whites in the General Assembly. In 1989, the state's renovated electorate chose an African American, L. Douglas Wilder, to be governor. Schools throughout the state, at every level, are racially integrated. This time around, the queen plans to meet Oliver W. Hill, who, born in the year of the 1907 celebration, turned 100 this week. Hill was one of the architects of the legal strategy that led to the U.S Supreme Court's 1954 ruling that Virginia's policy of school segregation violated the Constitution.

When the queen visited Virginia in 1957, the exact contours of early Jamestown were a matter of speculation. Fifty years later, thanks to the efforts of a team of archaeologists, we know the fort's exact location and dimensions. We can more readily envision the Jamestown of 400 years ago.

A metaphor for America's founding, the fort represents a continuous link back to 1607 — the beginnings of the first permanent English settlement in North America, the beginnings of British control of an area that later, together with New England and the coastal region in between, broke away to form a new nation, a nation that subsequently expanded west to Santa Fe and San Francisco, a nation that struggled over democracy and slavery and the place of peoples of all racial identities.

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