

Roanoke island: the lost colony essay sample



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Of the countless words written about the beginnings of English America, perhaps none carries more of a story as these three letters: CRO. Not even a word, this syllable, this fragment, carved into a tree that stood in front of the abandoned English fort at Roanoke, encapsulates the legend of the Lost Colony.

When John White returned to Roanoke in 1590 in the hopes of relieving, rescuing, or rejoining the colony he had left there three years earlier, he found all one hundred and ten people gone and the cryptic message left behind. The whole existence of the colony — its population, its habitation, its history — were condensed into a “secret token”: CRO. And yet John White believed this was a history he could read. In his narrative of these events, published by Richard Hakluyt in his *Principal Navigation* of 1600, he describes why:

...upon a tree, in the very browe thereof were curiously carved there faire Romane letters CRO: ... A secret token agreed upon between them and me at my last departure from then... [to] write or carve on the trees or posts of the doores the name of the place where they should be seated.... If they should happen to be distressed in any of those places, that then they should carve over the letters of the name a Crosse in this forme, but we found no such sign of distress. (Hakluyt, 1600)

The story of the Lost Colony has the earmarks of a myth: recurrence, plasticity, and indeterminacy. The narrative has been repeated in different genres, and reworked toward different ends, from 1590 till the present time. The story can shrink and grow, from the dense encoding of a three-letter

engraving to the endless dispersal of speculation upon what might have come before or after the making of that mark.

This narrative elasticity is linked to the story's failure to conclude. As an unsolved mystery, it both invites elaboration and forbids closure, and thus remains available as a cultural medium. This research offers a genealogy of the Lost Colony. This entails reconstructing events from White's success in finding the island of Roanoke in 1587 to his failed rescue mission in 1590.

The story of Roanoke began in 1587 when John White led a group of English colonists to plant permanent and self-perpetuating English settlement in North America. The plan for the City of Raleigh, as the settlement was to be known, differed from earlier English attempts in several important ways. The first difference was demographic. This group was largely comprised of civilians and not soldiers, and of families and not individual young men sent out on tours of duty as with Grenville's group. It was to be a community rather than a military outpost. The second difference was its destination.

The colony was headed for the richer lands and deeper ports of the Chesapeake Bay, and not for the storm-ridden and dangerous shoals of the Outer Banks that had proven all but fatal to English ships and, consequently, to the interests of English investors. The third difference was its economic base. The colony would sustain itself agriculturally while producing goods for English markets, instead of relying on English supply ships while setting its sights on privateering or the discovery of gold.

A fourth difference was in its administration. The colonists were part of a corporation, and as such were granted status, land, and a form of self-

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governance. They thus held personal interest, responsibility, and advantage in the success of their colony. All of these changes were intentional, meant to repair the damage that had been done to the prospects for Virginia by earlier ventures. By all rights, things should have turned out very differently.

Culturally and historically, the “mysteries” of the lost colony get played out in series of questions: How did the group end up in Roanoke? Why did they stay there? Why did John White agree to leave? What might have happened had White returned with a supply? And most importantly, where did all these people go? What happened to them in the end? It is a story that has only a beginning — no middle and, definitely, no end. Scholars do concur on many facts about the 1587 settlement. White and his group set out as part of a larger fleet, and intended to stop in Roanoke only to check on Grenville’s men before continuing north to Chesapeake Bay.

There in the northern Bay, probably near Kecoughtan, the colony was supposed to plant itself while the fleet continued on its privateering mission. For some reason, after stopping at Roanoke and finding the fort abandoned the pilot Simon Fernandez announced that he would not take White’s group any further north but would leave them at Roanoke; in whose interests this decision was made remains uncertain. White yielded. From there, things happened rather quickly.

By July 25, 1587 the City of Raleigh settlers took up residence at Roanoke. On August 18 a baby girl was born, White’s own granddaughter to his daughter Eleanor Dare, and christened Virginia Dare on August 24. By August 20, it was clear to the group that they could not survive without

immediate relief from England. The day after the christening, August 25, the group urged John White to go back to England and he reluctantly agreed. As the most influential person among the settlers, he was deemed the best qualified to make sure supplies were on their way. White arrived in England on November 8, 1587.

From that point on, things happened very slowly. Because of the sea war between England and Spain, White could not get back to America for three long years[1]. Repeatedly, he tried and failed. Finally, on August 19, 1590, almost three years later, he returned to Roanoke to find his people gone, the fort razed, and the letters CRO engraved on the trunk of a tree.

And here, the facts of the matter grind to a halt. In the midst of terrible storms, White could not convince the pilot and mariners to continue searching for the people he left three years earlier, although he strongly suspected at least some were waiting for him at Croatoan. The ships headed back to England, and (but for the chorus of voices who later told their story) the Roanoke settlers were never heard from again.

Historians speak in agreement on these central facts and near unison in this ominous finale, even if they then diverge into speculative epilogues about “ what may have been.” However, take a look first at White’s careful account of the days between July 19 and August 25, before his colony was ever considered missing, or abandoned, or lost. The events of those days echo, in a less mysterious but more deeply uncanny way, the world the English already knew in Roanoke. The birth of the infant Virginia Dare remains well-

remembered as a first, a landmark event — even her name sounds like a motto for colonial valor.

In the meantime, more significant occurrences in White's colony are well-forgotten: the death of a stray settler, an Indian battle report, a misguided attack that proved the perils of mistaken identity. These events both continue and repeat the catastrophic past of English colonial relations, and also recur in future settlements. Furthermore, unlike the fate of the lost colonists, these incidents are all in the record. It may have only been five weeks, but it is a history. For now, the mystery of " what happened next" can wait while we revisit what did happen, or what seemed to happen, while the English were still attempting a settlement at Roanoke.

Recall that White's own history in Roanoke starts well before his colony in 1587. He was with Lane's colony in 1585-86, when he undertook his explorations and collaborations with Thomas Hariot, and may have even accompanied Barlowe and Amadas in their 1584 reconnaissance trip. When he called in Roanoke in 1587, John White, now governor of the City of Raleigh, was back on familiar ground. Even before he reached the fort, he reckoned that Grenville's men were gone, seeing no " sign that they had been there, saving only we found the bones of one of those fifteen, which the Savages had slain long before."

This was the third time English people had found that very patch of land mysteriously forsaken in the two years since Queen Elizabeth had granted it to found deserted by the supply ship that arrived after the evacuation of Lane's colony. Although White " hoped to find some signs, or certain

knowledge of our fifteen men," he admitted to returning to the larger company " without hope of ever seeing any of the fifteen men living."

Looking for life and finding bones, shuttling between hope and loss of hope, White's search depicts a confusing synchronicity of signs. Even the dawning realization that people have disappeared conjures how the people themselves realized that they were truly finished. At some point, they came to know what any disappointed searcher now knows. White's group took up the sacked English outpost and set the City of Raleigh upon the remnants of Roanoke.

They could clear out the deer and melons that had taken over the standing English houses, but they could not clear out the history of Anglo-Native relations that surrounded the razed fort. This became clear within days. An air of melancholy, mystery and powerlessness surrounding White's colony serves to fogs over the next month's chain of events, but re-capturing even some of those incidents — the stray death, the battle report, the attack damaged by mistaken identity — can help us see that although John White may have found the fort deserted, it was never empty.

George Howe was the first casualty of the fort's third occupation. White offers a thick description of Howe's death. He reports on that on July 28, " diverse savages" came to Roanoke either to hunt deer or to spy on the new arrivals, keeping cover among the tall reeds.

The contrast between Howe's position — alone, naked, unarmed, astray, concentrated on the single basic task of trying to feed himself — contrasts sharply with the natives' position, who coordinate, conceal themselves,

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attack suddenly, overkill, mutilate, and flee. English representations of these attacks resonated within their own narrative folk tradition the lost hero beset by evil nature — a single human figure wandering unawares into a landscape that suddenly grows animate and deadly. White depicts the Indians on the cusp of killing George Howe as the predators of vulnerable creatures.

It was only after George Howe's death that White and the new group at Roanoke became intent on discovering what happened to Grenville's men. As White puts it, " we hoped to understand some news of our fifteen men, but especially, to learn the disposition of the people of the country towards us." The story came in the shape of a report from Manteo, who had returned to England with Lane's colony, and was now an established go-between whom the English relied upon to ease native relations. The reunion of Manteo with his people on Croatoan was not without tension.

At first the Croatoans poised to fight, and then fled from the English, returning only after Manteo called them in their own language. After a greeting and festive welcome, the Croatoans tactfully showed White a lame man who had been injured by Lane's company, when the English mistook the friendly Croatoan for an enemy Secotan. Still, the Croatoans asked for some emblem of friendship to avoid further confusions.

White did not record fulfilling this request, but did claim he also was willing to forgive and forget, and asked the Croatoans to help secure the promise of future friendship from the Secotans and nearby Aquosconocs and Pomeioks. At this point, Manteo pledged that the Croatoans would do their best to broker a détente, but he also reported it was common knowledge in the

country that late Wingina's Secotans, in company with the former English traveler Wanchese, were responsible both for Howe's recent death, and also for the forceful ousting of Grenville's men.

By August 8, John White "thought to defer revenge... no longer." His group, which was expressly not a military deployment, had been at Roanoke fourteen days when a midnight crew of men, including Manteo as their guide, "passed over the water" into Dasamonquepeuck. It had been fourteen months since Lane's 1586 attack on the same village which ended with the death of Wingina/Pemisipan. Like Lane's, White's report is focused most intently on moments when injured Indians are in an indiscernible state between life and death.

Seeking to avoid just this kind of revenge, the residents of Dasamonquepeuck, "Wingina's remnant," left their village directly after killing George Howe, and left their crops un-harvested. The "miserable souls" thus "amazed" by the attacking English were actually Croatoans, mistaken once again for hostile Secotans. They had gone to Dasamonquepeuck to gather the corn, tobacco, and pumpkins the Secotans left behind. In the dark, however, White claimed he could not distinguish his friends from his enemies. Because the people sitting at the fire were either naked or "appareled all so like others," White wrote that he and his party did not even recognize that women and children were among them; they literally only stopped from slaying the Croatoan werowance's wife by suddenly realizing she had a child at her back.

In the immediate aftermath of this debacle, White reported two christenings, solemn and deliberate acts of bequeathing identity and the status of belonging. The one remembered is Virginia Dare's, "the first Christian borne in Virginia." But in the days after the English attack on the Croatoan group, White wrote, "our Savage Manteo, by the commandment of Sir Walter Raleigh, was christened in Roanoke, and called Lord thereof, and of Dasamonquepeuck, in reward of his faithful service"[2].

Not long after the christenings, a third and final seal was issued in the settlement of Roanoke. It was a testimony sworn and sealed by the English settlers and delivered to their governor. It certified that they were sending John White back to England "for the present and speedy supply of certain our known and apparent lacks and needs"[3]. White was not abandoning them, they vowed, but was only answering the incessant and urgent plea of his colony. Though much against his will White had finally yielded to leave his government in their hands, and to return to England on their behalf. This was the last official act of the City of Raleigh before it became the Lost Colony. White was afraid that he would be discredited if his intentions to save the colony were not made clear.

Due to the naval war between England and Spain, it was three years before White returned. As White describes it, nineteen men on two boars anchored in the "exceeding dark" night, "sounded with a trumpet, a call, and afterwards many familiar English turns of songs, as called to them friendly; but we had no answer." Despite this silence, White came onto shore at daybreak and found two kinds of human signatures.

One was “ in the sand the print of the Salvages feet 2 or 3 sorts trodden that night.” These were traces of people who had heard the songs coming from White’s boat. The other was “ upon a tree, in the very brow thereof were curiously carved these fair Roman letters: CRO.” This was the trace of people who had not heard those songs. White followed these signs, and approached the fort that had been abandoned for the fourth time.

Passing through the gate, White found bars of iron and pigs of lead, guns, and light cannons “ almost overgrown with grass and weeds.” At the shore there was no sign of them. Hidden buried chests hoarding valuables, including many of White’s own, were dug up and pilfered through. These chests had been buried in trenches originally dug by crew of Barlowe and Amadas, and now their contents were scattered all around the empty ditches.

And so, while over a hundred people had simply vanished, the bark of a tree, gnarled like a troubled brow, bore the symbols of empire in the shape of Roman letters and a truncated Indian word. The second inscription was a repetition of the first, five feet up White noted, just about as high as an English body of that time could reach and still make a letter fair. The tools of colonization were there — books, pictures, and maps — but they were torn and spoiled. The means of enforcement were there — armor, cannons, iron — but they were corroded and entangled. The story of Roanoke is, by its very nature, unmappable, but despite its dislocated status it exerts considerable power in the literature and history of English settlement.

Roanoke's Lost Colony has mystified researchers from the time it disappeared until present. There exists a basic historical consensus on the problems that consigned Roanoke to failure such as the geographical problems of a shallow shoreline, the economic problems of privateering's influence, the political problems of a military outpost's relation with native cultures, and the twin pressures of rumor and abandonment[4]. Early settlements, and especially their first colonial forays, relied almost entirely on continued, reliable sponsorship and supply coming from groups in England. But these groups were notoriously unstable. Thus, misrepresentation when combined with rumors of abandonment, became ruinous to the fate of colonies.

Some believe (even White) that the settlers had voluntarily moved to the Indian village of Croatoan, 40 miles south of Roanoke, where they had secured at least a temporary safe haven through their alliance with Manteo. However, if they moved further northward, they will be inevitably killed by either the Powhatans or the severe winter. John White, however, was not given the chance to confirm his hypothesis. He did not make it to Croatoan to recover his colony, or its remainder.

The small English fleet that carried White back to Roanoke in 1590 was interested in finding an established colony only insofar as it might be used as someplace to spend winter months while waiting to seize upon Spanish ships in the West Indies in the spring. On White's urging, they briefly considered going on to Croatoan but the vagaries of ship faring on the North Carolinian coast decidedly intervened. Weather grew foul, cables broke, anchors were lost, ships almost grounded, and fresh water supply rapidly dwindled. John

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White's objectives came no where close to prevailing, and he was left to commit his "discomfortable company the planters in Virginia, to the merciful help of the Almighty." And to the pages of history.

In 1937, there circulated rumors of a stone beside a swamp in Georgia bearing a writing: *Ananias Dare and Virginia went hence unto Heaven 1591*. The grocer who had found the stone realized that this is an answer to the puzzle that mystified America for about 400 years and so brought it to Emory University in Atlanta for study. The university then invited a specialist in American History, by the person of Samuel Eliot Morison, to have a closer look at the stone. Morison agreed that it certainly looked like real. Additional stones were found many bearing Eleanor Dare's name.

However, when the professors searched for the grocer, they found that there are no records of such a person in California. Beginning to doubt the authenticity of the stone, they brought the stones to an Elizabethan scholar in England for a closer look. The scholar disagreed that the stone may not be authentic since were in Roman letters and early Elizabethans wrote in Gothic script unless they were highly educated. Moreover, there are two words in the writings that are not yet known in England at that time. Thus, the stones were a ruse[5].

Many projects have been established in order to search for clues and find answers behind the story of the Lost Colony. Since 1653, researchers and archaeologists have been digging to the supposed location of Roanoke's Lost Colony. In 1895, Talcott Williams, a journalist in Philadelphia and an amateur archaeologist, attempted to search for artifacts by digging the supposed site

of the Lost Colony. During the late 1940s, professional archaeologists dug on some excavations and were able to find some artifacts that might belong to Harriot's science laboratory built during the English's first attempt to colonize the Roanoke Island. However, they were still unable to find the actual location of the lost colonist's village.

Some believe that the failure of these projects to find the actual location of White's Roanoke Colony and artifacts from the said colony is linked with the island's shoreline erosion[6]. Dolan and Bosserman explain that although researches and studies have not found the actual location of the settlement site of White's Roanoke Colony, there are evidences that indicate the site is located within a short distance from the shore of the island. They further explain that since 1587, the time White arrived at the fort of the island, the shoreline has not been stable. Regarding the stability of the island's shoreline, it is, therefore not surprising that no one has found neither the actual location of the settlement site nor any artifacts that suggest of the existence (or disappearance) of the colony.

The most recent addition to the many projects attempting to discover the truth behind the disappearance of Roanoke's Colony is the First Colony Foundation launched early on March 2004. The project was started by Phil Evans, a North Carolina attorney. The project aimed to find further clues about Harriot's science laboratory and the actual location of the colonists' village[7]. The project has the same hypothesis as Dolan and Bosserman — that the colonists' village must have been eroded away.

Given the diversity of these sources it is most interesting to find that, despite different aims and audiences, almost all treatments of Roanoke end similarly, trailing off into a resonant silence in which the lost or abandoned settlers are neither absent nor present, but finally un-locatable even to history. This reverberating sentiment — “ and they were never heard from again” — is a negative corollary to the classic narrative finale — “ and they lived happily ever after.” It keeps a story going as much as the latter phrase seals one off. While popular sources pluck this final string with varying degrees of unabashed theatricality, academic treatments also participate in recreating the aura of mystery. As Evans said, “ As long as the Lost Colony is unexplained, it stays fascinating for a lot of people.”[8]

Roanoke was left to speak for itself, because it stopped the speech of others. Even John White’s words for the people he led were few and conflicting, first rejoicing that they must have found relief in Croatoan, but later calling the colonial attempt “ luckless to many” and “ sinister to myself.” Like the planters, the soldiers, the slaves, the dead bodies; the wrecked books and drawings, the wrecked houses and ships; the knowledge of rivers and blunders of identity; the villages de-populated willingly or unwillingly; the Indian leaders bound, murdered, beheaded or crowned — like all of these other missing things, the story of a Lost Colony itself was “ left there,” both part and not part of the English plan for America, both compelling and resisting further action.

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