

Survival and sanctity essay

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Survival and Sanctity: The Saga of America's Earliest Colonies

America's earliest colonies quickly took on the personalities and preferences of their founders. Together they are instructive historical records in themselves because they reflect the social climate of the early 17th century English diaspora. Their motivations for wanting to establish settlements in the New World roughly follow a widening political divide that would burst asunder in the mid-1600s when the Puritan-led forces of Parliament rose against the monarchy, eventually defeating and overthrowing the power of the King in the person of Charles I. The self-styled "elect" of God sought to create a new holy land where the penitent could live beyond the laws of England and worship as they saw fit. The Virginia and Maryland colonies arose from largely commercial ventures, though Lord Baltimore's colony was notable because it offered a religious haven for English Roman Catholics. These "southern" settlements, Jamestown in particular, were largely products of the rise of the English merchant class, which sought to maximize profits and aggrandize its influence through the production of cash crops, notably tobacco. It is interesting that while each colony reflected the characteristics and social agendas of their settlers, the success of each was hampered by the unique shortcomings of their inhabitants and the political, economic and religious systems under which they operated.

For the merchant adventurers who formed the Virginia Company, the Jamestown settlement that Captain John Smith had spearheaded was one among what would become many far flung commercial enterprises predicated on the notion that native crops and resources promised vast

wealth. However, poor planning, politics within the company and chronic logistical problems nearly combined to undo the colony. In 1624, Smith wrote to company officials about the overwhelming burden of costs associated with maintaining the settlement. In effect, Smith sought to persuade the investors that the settlers couldn't make a go of it "on the cheap" – Jamestown required more in the way of resources and capital. "From your ship we have not provision in vituals worth twenty pound, and we are more than two hundred to live upon this: the one half sick, the other little better" (Smith, 1624). Smith also complained of the terrible costs exacted by the sailors, who from a financial standpoint, had the settlers at their mercy. "These are the causes that have kept us in Virginia, from laying such a foundation, that ere this might have given much better content and satisfaction," Smith opined. Subsequent tragic events, from the "starving time" to the Good Friday massacre in 1622, would prove the wisdom of Smith's words and ultimately convince the crown to take control of the colony.

Maryland had a somewhat easier transition. Founded by Sir George Calvert, a prominent English Catholic, the colony on the Chesapeake profited from especially fertile soil and good relations with the native Indians. As was the case in Virginia, Maryland's early economy was dominated by one fabulously lucrative crop. "Tobacco is the only solid Staple Commodity of this province" noted George Alsop in 1660. "Tobacco is the currant Coyn of Mary-Land, and will sooner purchase commodities from the Merchant, than money" (Alsop). Alsop noted that tobacco was almost exclusively the form of exchange among the colony's early inhabitants. "They have more bags to carry Corn,

then Coyn” he mused (Ibid, 1660). Marylanders also trafficked in animal furs and “flesh,” which was sold to merchants and thence transported to England, which proved to be a steady and reliable market.

The Puritan colony in New England was radically different from Virginia and Maryland. The Puritans had years before fled to Holland to avoid persecution for dissenting from fundamental precepts of the Anglican Church. John Winthrop and other leaders of their order sought nothing less than the establishment of a theocracy in the New World. Their aim was to establish a “shining city” as an example for the world to follow. The idea that the Puritans had the mandate of Heaven has, to a large extent, remained a part of America’s conception of its mission in the world. In his shipboard sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity,” Winthrop left no doubt as to the reason for their mission: “Thus stands the cause between God and us. We are entered into covenant with Him for this work, we have taken out a commission, the Lord hath given us leave to draw our own articles we have professed to enterprise these actions upon these...ends” (Winthrop, 1630).

The Plymouth colony the Puritans established in 1630 came about after many stops and starts attributable to problems with the Dutch and then with the Virginia Company. Those that saw it through were part of an interesting communal arrangement that speaks to the solidarity of this early settlement. All agreed that all financial gains would go toward the collective maintenance of the colony for a period of seven years. At the end of seven years, all community property was to be divided among all citizens, “which done, every man shall be free from other of them of any debt or detriment concerning this adventure” (Bradford, 1630). As such, the

Plymouth colonists were able to solidify their community in a way that eluded their counterparts at Jamestown, which required direct intervention by the Crown in order to survive.

References

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