

What Happened to the Lost Colonists? Clues!



No one has ever determined for sure what happened to the Lost Colonists. When John White returned to Roanoke Island in 1590, three years after leaving the settlement, he found the fort abandoned. More than a hundred people had vanished, yet White and his men spotted no signs of violence. There were just a few clues to suggest where the colonists might have gone.

Did some of the Lost Colonists join the Croatoans?

When describing the empty fort, White mentions a sturdy log palisade that the colonists had built to defend themselves. It was new to him, and so must have been constructed after he sailed to England. The word *CROATOAN* was carved in one of the posts. White's letter states:

We passed toward the place where they were left in sundry houses, but we found the houses taken downe, and the place very strongly enclosed with a high palisado of great trees, with cortynes and flankers very Fort-like, and one of the chiefe trees or postes at the right side of the entrance had the barke taken off, and 5 foote from the ground in fayre Capitall letters was graven CROATOAN without any crosse or signe of distresse.

"Croatoan" was the name of a nearby island and its resident Indian tribe.

White also notes discarded iron bars, iron guns, and ammunition found among the weeds inside the palisade, and he complains that three of his own chests, buried in a trench, had been dug up and despoiled. He concludes,

Although it much grieved me to see such spoyle of my goods, yet on the other side I greatly joyed that I had safely found a certaine token of their safe being at Croatoan, which is the place where Manteo was borne, and the Savages of the Iland our friends.

John White does not mention his daughter, Elenor Dare, or granddaughter, Virginia, though they were among the lost. Bad weather and impatient sailors prevented him from searching Croatoan Island (later named Hatteras Island) for members of his company. Clearly he trusted that many of the colonists had found sanctuary with the Croatoans, Manteo's people. Manteo had been a reliable ally of the English.

White's surmise may well have been correct. In the early 1700s, John Lawson, surveyor-general of the Carolina colony, visited Hatteras Island. He reported encountering Indians there with gray eyes who knew of books. He wrote:

These tell us, that several of their Ancestors were white People, and could talk in a Book [read], as we do; the Truth of which is confirm'd by gray Eyes being found frequently amongst these Indians, and no others. They value themselves extremely for their Affinity to the English, and are ready to do them all friendly Offices.

It is possible that a group of the Lost Colonists assimilated with the Croatoans.

✂ *What Happened to the Lost Colonists? Clues!, page 2*

Did some of the Lost Colonists move north to the Chesapeake Bay region?

The English pioneers who founded Jamestowne on the Chesapeake Bay in 1607 heard rumors of pale-skinned people living in the region and hoped these might be survivors of the Roanoke colony. Powhatan, chief of the Virginia Algonkian confederacy (and father of Pocahontas), reported to Captain John Smith that white people had lived for years with the Chesapeake Indians, but that he and his warriors had recently killed them. Powhatan reportedly showed Smith a few English artifacts as confirmation. Powhatan's brother offered more information, claiming that some English people were still alive farther inland. He described their locations, which Smith noted on a map.

Were these reports true? We can't be sure. John Smith's veracity is a subject of debate; he was a bold storyteller (his tale of being saved from death by Pocahontas was embellished over time), yet many of his tallest tales have proven consistent with real historical events. And we can only guess about the reliability and motives of Powhatan and his brother. Their reports of a massacre and of English survivors living in the Chesapeake Bay area were never verified by the Jamestowne settlers, and no archaeological evidence has been found to support these claims.

Yet it is certainly possible that members of the Lost Colony ventured north toward the Chesapeake Bay, since the company originally planned to settle there. Also, White's 1590 report states, "for at my coming away, they [the colonists] were prepared to remove from Roanoak 50 miles into the maine [mainland]." If the colonists did venture fifty miles into the mainland, as planned, they could have traveled north in groups by sea or land. If by sea, some could have used the pinnace, the small oceangoing ship that was left with them. If by land, they would have crossed Albemarle Bay and then hiked north, a feat that previous Elizabethan explorers had managed without difficulty.

Did some of the Lost Colonists move inland?

The other, most persistent theory concerning the fate of the Lost Colonists suggests that a band of survivors (or their descendants) eventually moved inland, into the Robeson County, NC, region, where they assimilated with the local Indians, now known as the Lumbee. Many people have assumed that when White said the colonists planned to move "50 miles into the maine" after he left them, he meant they planned to relocate *north*, into the mainland around the Chesapeake Bay. But perhaps they traveled west and south ... into the protective swamps. Oral tradition among the mixed-blood Lumbee Indians held that they were descendants of the Lost Colonists, citing the fact that many of their surnames matched those on John White's company list and that they spoke an English dialect marked by archaic words and phrases.

Did the Algonkians attack the Lost Colonists?

Clearly some Algonkians were determined to resist the English; the murder of George Howe (one of the Roanoke colonists) by Wanchese proves this. The Algonkians had reason for attacking these pale invaders. Previous English expeditions had burned an Algonkian village and fields in retaliation for the theft of a silver cup; they had demanded supplies of corn even though the region was locked in drought; and they had beheaded Wingina, the leader of a mainland tribe. John White himself had led a dawn raid that mistakenly fired on his allies, the Croatoans. And yet White found no signs of violence when he reached the fort in 1590. Was there an attack? *The mysteries live on.*