



John Smith

from "A Brief Relation written by Captain Smith to His Majesty's Commissioners for the reformation of Virginia, concerning some aspersion against it," in John Smith, *The General History of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles*, 1624:

Since [by 1624], there have gone more than one hundred ships of other proportions, and eight or ten thousand people.

Now if you please to compare what has been spent, sent, and discovered, and done this fifteen years [1609-1624, since Smith left the colony], by that we did in the three first years: and every governor that has been there since, give you but such an account as this, you may easily find what has been the cause of those disasters in Virginia. . . .

. . . these nineteen years [1603-1624, including preparations for the first Jamestown expedition] I have here and there not spared anything according to my ability, nor the best advice I could, to persuade how those strange miracles of misery might have been presented, which lamentable experience plainly taught me of necessity must ensue, but few would believe me till now too dearly they have paid for it.

JAMESTOWN: THE END OF THE COMPANY

JOHN SMITH ❖ Answers to Seven Questions presented by King James's Commission for the Reformation of Virginia

1624 ❖ EXCERPTS

Capt. John Smith presented "A Brief Relation" (1624, left) to the king's commission investigating the economic failure of the Jamestown colony as directed by the investors of the London Company of Virginia. In response, the commission presented Smith with seven questions.

Quest. 1.

What conceive you is the cause the Plantation has prospered no better since you left it in so good a forwardness [1609]?

Answ.

Idleness and carelessness brought all I did in three years, in six months to nothing; and of five hundred [men] I left, scarce threescore remained; and had Sir Thomas Gates not got from the Bermudas, I think they had been all dead before they should be supplied.

Quest. 2.

What conceive you should be the cause, though the Country be good, there comes nothing but Tobacco?

Answ.

The oft altering of Governors it seems causes every man [to] make use of his time, and because Corn was stinted at two shillings sixpence the bushel, and Tobacco stinted at three shillings the pound; and they value a man's labor a year worth fifty or threescore pound, but in Corn not worth ten pound, presuming Tobacco will furnish them with all things: now make a man's labor in Corn worth threescore pound, and in Tobacco but ten pound a man, then shall they have Corn sufficient to entertain all comers, and keep their people in health to do anything; but till then, there will be little or nothing to any purpose.

The Powhatan Indians, antagonized by the settlers and aware of their plans to enlarge the colony, launched an attack on March 22, 1622, destroying crops and nearby settlements, and killing 347 men, women, and children, nearly a third of the colonists. Due to the loss of supplies, over 500 settlers died during the following winter. In the next two years the colonists killed hundreds of Indians in retribution.

Wisconsin Historical Society



de Bry, Indian Massacre of 1622, publ. 1655

National Park Service



Site of Jamestown colony, as photographed in the 1950s, in Cotter & Hudson, *New Discoveries in Jamestown*, U.S. National Park Service, 1957

Quest. 3.

What conceive you to have been the cause of the [1622] Massacre, and had the Savages had the use of any pieces [firearms] in your time, or when, or by whom were they taught?

Answ.

The cause of the Massacre was the want of martial discipline; and because [the Indians] would have all the English had by destroying those they found so carelessly secure, that [the English] were not provided to defend themselves against any enemy; being so dispersed as they were. In my time, though Captain Newport furnished [the Indians] with swords by truck [barter], and many fugitives did the like, and some Pieces they got accidentally: yet I got the most of [the firearms] again; and it was death to him that should show a Savage the use of a Piece. Since, I understand, they became so good shot, they were employed for Fowlers and Huntsmen by the English.

Quest. 4.

What charge think you would have settled the government both for defense and planting when you left it?

Answ.

Twenty thousand pounds would have hired good laborers and mechanical men, and have furnished them with cattle and all necessaries; and one hundred of them would have done more than a thousand of those that went: though the Lord De La Ware, Sir Fernando Wainman, Sir Thomas Gates, and Sir Thomas Dale [colony officials in 1609] were persuaded to the contrary; but when they had tried, they confessed their error.

Quest. 5.

What conceive you would be the remedy and the charge?

Answ.

The remedy is to send Soldiers and all sorts of laborers and necessaries for them, that they may be there by next Michaelmas [autumn 1624], the which to do well will stand you in five thousand pounds: but if his Majesty would please to lend two of his Ships to transport them, less [money] would serve; besides the benefit of his grace to the action would encourage all men.

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THE INCONVENIENCIES THAT HAVE HAPPENED TO SOME PERSONS WHICH HAVE TRANSPORTED THEMSELVES

From England to Virginia, without provisions necessary to sustain themselves, hath greatly hindered the progress of that noble Plantation: For prevention of the like Disorders hereafter, that no man suffer, either through ignorance or misinformation, it is thought requisite to publish this short declaration: wherein is contained a particular of such necessaries, as either private families or single persons shall have come to furnish themselves with, for their better support at their first landing in Virginia; whereby also greater numbers may receive in part, directions how to provide themselves.

List of "provisions necessary to sustain themselves" issued by the London Company for potential colonists, 1622

"The inconveniencies that have happened to some persons which have transported themselves from England to Virginia, without provisions necessary to sustain themselves, hath greatly hindered the progress of that noble Plantation: For prevention of the like disorders hereafter, that no man suffer, either through ignorance or misinformation, it is thought requisite to publish this short declaration: wherein is contained a particular of such necessaries, as either private families or single persons shall have come to furnish themselves with, for their better support at their first landing in Virginia; whereby also greater numbers may receive in part, directions how to provide themselves."

Quest. 6.

What think you are the defects of the government both here and there?

Ans.

. . . [S]ome are so desirous to employ their ships, having six pounds for every Passenger, and three pounds for every ton of goods, at which rate a thousand ships may now stock defrayed all freights, wages, provisions, and Magazines, whereby the Ships are so pestered, as occasions much sickness, disease, and mortality; for though all the Passengers die they are sure of their freight; and then all must be satisfied with Orations, disputations, excuses and hopes.

As for the letters of advice from hence, and their answers thence, they are so well written, men would believe there were no great doubt of the performance and that all things were well, to which error here they have been ever much subject; and there not to believe, or not to relieve the true and poor estate of that Colony, whose fruits were commonly spent before they were ripe, and this loss is nothing to them here [England], whose great estates are not sensible of the loss of their adventures, . . .

Quest. 7.

How think you it may be rectified?

Ans.

If his Majesty would please to entitle it [the Jamestown colony] to his Crown, and yearly that both the Governors here and there may give their accounts to you, or some that are not engaged in the business, that the common stock be not spent in maintaining one hundred men for the Governor, one hundred for two Deputies, fifty for the Treasurer, five and twenty for the Secretary, and more for the Marshall and other Officers [of the London Company of Virginia], who were never there nor adventured [invested] anything; but only preferred by favor to be Lords over them that broke the ice and beat the path, and must teach them what to do. If anything happen well, it is their glory; if ill, the fault of the old directors, that in all dangers must endure the worst, yet not five hundred of them have so much as one of the others.

Also that there be some present course taken to maintain a Garrison to suppress the Savages, till they be able to subsist, and that his Majesty would please to remit his custom; or it is to be feared they will lose custom and all, for this cannot be done by promises, hopes, councils and countenances, but with sufficient workmen and means to maintain them: not with such delinquents

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Daniel Mytens, portrait of King James I of England, 1621

as here cannot be ruled by all the laws in England. Yet when the foundation is laid, as I have said, and a commonwealth established, then such there may better be constrained in labor than here; but to rectify a commonwealth with debased people is impossible, and no wise man would throw himself into such a society, that intends honestly, and knows what he undertakes. For there is no Country to pillage as the Romans found: all you expect from thence must be by labor. . . .

And except his Majesty undertake it, or by Act of Parliament some small tax may be granted throughout his Dominions, as a Penny upon every Poll, called a head-penny; two pence upon every Chimney, or some such collection might be raised, and that would be sufficient to give a good stock, and many servants to sufficient men of any faculty, and transport them freely for paying only homage to the Crown of England, and such duties to the public good as their estates increased, reason should require. Were this put in practice, how many people of what quality you please, for all those disasters would yet gladly go to spend their lives there, and by this means more good might be done in one year, than all those petty particular undertakings will effect in twenty. . . .

If I be too plain, I humbly crave your pardon; but you requested me, there I do but my duty. For the Nobility, who knows not how freely both in their Purses and assistances many of them have been to advance it, committing the managing of the business to inferior persons: among whom questionless also many have done their utmost best, sincerely and truly according to their conceit, opinion and understanding; yet gross errors have been committed, but no man lives without his fault. For my own part, I have so much ado to amend my own, I have no leisure to look into any man's particular [fault], but those in general I conceive to be true. And so I humbly rest

Yours to command,

J. S.