**Lonely Colonist Seeks Wife:**

**The Forgotten History of America’s First Brides**

*As Catherine looks out across the water, she wonders what her life will be like when she reaches Virginia. She knows that conditions will be hard, but life in England was also hard. At least in the colony, there is the possibility of improvement. The Virginia Company has assured her and the other women that they will have their choice of marriage partners. They have promised that the men are wealthy, or at least will be wealthy with the women’s help. Moreover, in Virginia, as a married woman she has the right to share in her husband’s wealth. Catherine knows it is a risk, but she has been assured she can always return home if she changes her mind.*

*Regardless, Catherine expects to stay. There is little for her back in England. She will marry a colonist and help found a nation.*

In the early American colonies, marriage was particularly important. The entire colonial endeavor hinged on marriage. Without marriage there could be no stable family units, no children and no future. The colonies needed women to come to America to marry, and to remain as wives and mothers. The problem, however, was that most women found the idea of immigrating to the struggling colonies unattractive. “Jamestown” brides were the solution. These women came to the colonies when other women would not. The brides made marriage possible and helped ensure the survival and success of the colony.

**WHY A GENDER IMBALANCE?**

Britain and France established colonial settlements in the early 1600s. Both actively encouraged immigration to America but soon realized that immigration alone could not achieve the population increase needed for colonial expansion and success.

Few families immigrated to the Southern colonies of the United States or the colonies of New France. Unlike the northern settlements of the United States, which were populated by family groups fleeing religious persecution, the southern and French colonies were established by individual fortune hunters. Colonists in the southern and French settlements sought to profit from America’s abundant land and natural resources, but they did not bring families and they did not intend to stay.

Because few families immigrated to the American South and New France, those colonies’ populations were almost exclusively male. To solve this gender imbalance and entice the male colonists to remain, the colonial governments actively sought to increase the number of marriageable women in the colony. Single European women were recruited to immigrate to the colonies and marry the surplus bachelors.

**PROBLEMS CAUSED BY THE LACK OF WOMEN**

The founding colonists of the 1607 Jamestown colony were exclusively male. Shortly thereafter, the Virginia Company began to specifically solicit female as well as male immigrants, but only small numbers of women responded. The failure to attract women devastated the colony’s prospects. By 1614, a mere seven years after the establishment of Jamestown by the Virginia Company of London, it was clear that the fledgling colony was beginning to falter. The lack of women threatened the permanence of the colony. The male colonists could not marry and start families. Without families, these men were unable to establish the roots necessary to sustain an enduring colony.

As historian Julia Cherry Spruill writes,

“these unmarried men were not interested in building permanent homes in Virginia or in cultivating lands to be enjoyed by future generations.” Instead, the colonists simply “planned to make their fortunes and then return to England.”

Responding to the concern caused by the lack of female colonists, Lord Bacon, a founding member of the Virginia Company, stated

“it is time to plant with women as well as with men; that the plantation may spread into generations, and not ever be pieced from without.”

Bacon recognized that in order to achieve a self-sustaining colonial population, a significant number of women needed to be convinced to immigrate to the colony.

Consequently, the Virginia Company, which not only founded but also governed Jamestown, began to actively recruit and provide incentives for women to come to America. The Virginia Company first attempted to stabilize the population bu increasing the efforts to recruit families rather than single colonists.

**EARLY ATTEMPTS TO RECRUIT WOMEN**

In 1614, the Company’s lawyer, Richard Martin, spoke before the House of Lords and declared that Virginia’s greatest need was “for honest laborers, with wives and children . . . .” Martin requested the appointment of a committee to consider means of enticing families. His speech was described as “the most unfitting that was ever spoken in the house” and as a result, his demands were ignored. When the Company tried to increase the population again a few years later, it decided to pursue a different strategy.

In 1619, the Virginia Company’s treasurer, Sir Edwin Sandys, took control of the Company and proposed a novel idea to save the colony (as well as his own investment). The Company followed Sandys’s advice and in the Spring of 1620, ninety marriageable women arrived in Jamestown. The next year Sandys requested the funds to recruit an additional 100 women. By that time, the Company no longer had the money to fund the women’s passage, but because of Sandys’s insistence that more women were absolutely essential, the Company agreed to raise the money by subscription and through the assistance of the Earl of Southampton and others. Through these efforts, the Company managed to pay for the passage of another fifty brides. By the time the initiative ended, the Virginia Company had provided passage for 140 brides.

Sandys’ plea demonstrates that the first brides were as essential to the success of the American colonies. By marrying the colonists, the Jamestown brides helped discourage the men from returning to England and, just as importantly, helped prevent the colonists who settled permanently from entering into marriages with native women.

**INTERMARRIAGE WITH INDIAN WOMEN**

John Rolfe, who famously married Pocahontas, was not the only colonist to take an Indian bride. In 1608, when disease and starvation wiped out nearly a third of the original Jamestown colonists, including many of the first female settlers, a number of the male survivors married Indian women. The number of these marriages increased rapidly and by 1612, the Spanish ambassador to England reported to Madrid that “between 40 to 50 Englishman were living in Pohawaten’s [Pocahontas’s father] villages and had married Indian women.”

Shortly thereafter, the colonial government decided that such intermarriages needed to be stopped. Intermarriage was considered just as threatening to the future of the colony as reverse immigration back to England. Often, once a male colonist married an Indian woman, he abandoned the colony completely.” Even marriages in which the Indian bride moved to Jamestown were viewed with concern. The colonial government believed that Indian women would never truly be committed to the colony and viewed marriage with these women as a significant security threat.

In 1705, one commentator noted that the example of John Rolfe, the husband of Pocahontas, “might well have been followed by other settlers . . . were it not for fear that the women shou’d conspire with those of their own Nation, to destroy their husbands.” Given these concerns, it is not surprising that in 1691, Virginia became the first colony to prohibit white-Indian marriages. However, before such marriages could be effectively prevented, significant numbers of marriageablewhite women had to be available. The Jamestown brides provided the settlers with alternatives to Indian women and thus made the discouragement and subsequent outlawing of white-Indian relationships possible.

**SELECTING THE RIGHT WOMEN**

The Jamestown brides were considered vital to the future of the colony and therefore the type of woman recruited was an issue addressed with care. The colony was not simply looking for any woman willing to immigrate; they were looking for “founding mothers.” The Virginia Company’s letters indicate that significant attention was exercised in choosing the women. The recruits were all

women who “had been received . . . upon good recommendation.” They were not criminals, or beggars, and although many of the intended brides were poor, they were not desperate.

Moreover, these women chose to immigrate. This choice was considered essential, and the government actively protected women from the possibility of forced immigration. When a fortune hunter named Owen Smith pretended to have received a royal commission authorizing him to force single women onto ships bound for Virginia, he was quickly arrested.

**PROVIDING FINANCIAL INCENTIVES**

The Virginia Company and the Jamestown colonists needed to provide the women with significant incentives to leave England. They needed to guarantee the women substantial privileges once they arrived. A number of these incentives were monetary. Each woman was given petticoats, caps, an apron, two pairs of shoes and six pairs of sheets. They were provided free transport to the colony and upon arrival were given food and shelter until they married.

The recruiters assured women they would not be forced “to marry against their will” and promised them wealthy husbands. The women were told that they would be married to freemen, not servants, and that any eligible man would possess enough wealth to maintain a household comfortably.

The Company requiring any colonist who married one of the women to pay the Company 120 pounds of the best leaf tobacco as reimbursement for the woman’s transport costs. In addition, the Company promised the women a certain level of status. The monetary and social prospects undoubtedly appealed to the women, some of whom were orphans or widows and nearly all of whom came from modest backgrounds.

**LOTS OF CHOICES AND MORE RIGHTS**

In Virginia, men outnumbered women six to one in the early decades of the seventeenth century. During the same period in England, there were approximately nine males for every ten females. This disparity resulted in the high valuation of and greater rights and opportunities for women in the colony. The leaders of Virginia and its neighboring colonies recognized that many single women would find this ratio attractive and actively used it as a recruitment tool. Their scarcity made colonial women valuable; therefore, colonial women were likely to marry and marry well. Scarcity also meant that women enjoyed an increased legal and social position.

Early colonial law cases confirm that American women occupied a powerful position. In England, women could not hold property in their own name, alter or dispose of property without their husband’s consent (even if such property was their own inheritance), or make wills without their husband’s agreement, and all their moveable property became their husband’s with marriage.

The system was vastly different in the colonies. Colonial women enjoyed greater rights and privileges than women in Britain. Jamestown women had marriage rights even with husband’s’.

When the Virginia lands were first distributed, members of the Virginia House of Burgesses asked the Virginia Company that parcels of land be allotted for both the male colonists and their wives. The Company clearly agreed, and granted the wives property shares equal to those given to their husbands.

The equal distribution of property shows the greater property rights possessed by colonial women, as well as the greater equality that existed between the sexes.

Maryland, Virginia and South Carolina, the states with the fewest women—granted women more inheritance rights, as well as greater legal powers.

**THE MODERN PERSPECTIVE**

Nevertheless, the arrival of the brides in America is often depicted as one of victimization rather than choice. In her 2008 book *Eve to Dawn*, feminist Marilyn French describes the story of the Jamestown brides as one of abuse and exploitation. She writes:

[T]he government decided to kidnap a hundred or so “young and uncorrupt” girls, force them aboard a ship, and sell them as wives to Virginia men for the cost of their passage. Ninety girls

were taken in 1620, fifty more in 1621–22; all were soon married, but men clamored for more, insisting they needed women to wash their clothes and nurse them. Through terrorism and rape, the sex ratio became three men to everywoman.

By describing the Jamestown brides as hapless victims, French’s portrayal ignores the fact that brides made a reasonable choice to control their marriages and better their lives.