



In 1587, a group of settlers from England arrived at Roanoke Island. Sir Walter Raleigh wanted to sail back to see them, to make sure all was well, in 1588.

However, when the Spanish Armada was threatening Britain, Queen Elizabeth did not allow any ships to make a transatlantic journey. The ships had to be used to defend the realm against the Spaniards.

Why did English settlers arrive at Roanoke Island in the first place? We learn more of the history from the British website, *The Daily Mail* :

The Roanoke Colony was an attempt by Queen Elizabeth I to establish a permanent British presence in the New World, and comprises two unsuccessful attempts at settlement.

Elizabeth's intention was to exploit the natural riches of the unexplored country, as well as using the colony as a base from which to launch privateering raids on Spanish ships.

The enterprise was originally financed and planned by Sir Humphrey Gilbert, but was later headed by Sir Humphrey's half brother Sir Walter Raleigh.

An exploration mission led by Philip Amadas and Arthur Barlowe landed at Roanoke Island on July 4, 1584, and established good relations with the Secotan and Croatan tribes. Barlowe returned to England with members of the tribes, who told Sir Walter about the local customs and geography.

Sir Walter ordered another mission in 1585, led by his distant cousin Sir Richard Grenville. The expedition also included Sir Walter's artist friend John White, who was to provide invaluable coastal mapping of the region.

Sir Richard left 107 men to establish a fort and settlement on Roanoke Island, but within a year the colonists had managed to anger the local tribes, leading to open hostilities.

When Sir Francis Drake stopped there in 1586, after a successful raiding expedition to the Caribbean, he offered to provide passage for anyone who wanted to return to England. Everyone accepted.

When Sir Richard returned with supplies to find the settlement abandoned, he left a small group to retain an English presence.

Sir Walter sent another expedition of 150 people in 1587, led by White. The only evidence they found of the small group left behind was a single skeleton. Relations with the tribes had not improved and, after a settler was killed in Albemarle Sound, White returned to England to ask for help and reinforcements.

... Before he left for England, White had arranged a code with the colonists. If they were under attack or forced to flee - a sensible arrangement considering relations with the locals - the colonists were to carve a Maltese cross into a tree. (See "Is THIS the Lost Roanoke Colony," by "Daily Mail Reporter," published by The Daily Mail on December 9, 2013 and updated December 10, 2013.)

It took a while before White could return. The Colony's map-maker and general overseer had other demands on him and his time—such as the war between England and Spain (when the Spanish Armada sailed up the English Channel with an aim toward conquering England).

When White—a friend of Raleigh's and the original commander of the settlement effort—was finally able to return to Roanoke Island, on the 18th of August in 1590, he found that the settlement had been dismantled and all the people were gone. He found not a trace of the 90 men, 17 women and 11 children whom he'd left behind.

Virginia Dare—the first-known European citizen to be born in the American Colonies, who was also White's grand daughter—was also missing. She would have been three years old at the time White returned.

White did find two clues, consistent with the instructions he'd given the English settlers. One clue—"Cro"—was

carved onto the trunk of a tree. Another clue—"Croatoan" (the name of a Native-American tribe)—was carved on a fence post.

What did these clues mean? No one has ever really figured it out:

Whether this was a reference to the settlement's assailants, or an indicator that the colonists had gone to live with the Croatans on nearby Hatteras Island, remains unclear. Poor weather and his shipmates' desire to leave Roanoke forced White to abandon his search for the colonists. He never returned.

*A voyage by Sir Walter Raleigh 12 years later in 1602 also ended when bad weather forced the expedition to return to England. Sir Walter's arrest for treason [for which he was ultimately beheaded] prevented him from making any other expeditions. (See *The Daily Mail* article, referenced above.)*

To this day, no one knows what happened to the settlers. Their Roanoke settlement is known as "The Lost Colony."

In recent years, however, many people have tried to solve the mystery. One possible explanation for the settlers' disappearance is the weather and a very bad drought which occurred between 1587-1589. Perhaps this caused them to take shelter with the Native Americans.

How do we know about this awful drought? Researchers studied trees on Roanoke Island. The rings of the trees revealed startling information:

...a study by researchers Dennis Blanton from the College of William and Mary and climatologist David Stahle of the tree ring laboratory of the University of Arkansas sheds some light on the mysterious circumstances under which the colonists disappeared.

The researchers looked at the tree rings of centuries-old bald cypress trees in swamps along the Blackwater and Nottoway rivers on the Virginia-North Carolina border.

Every year in the growth season, trees grow by adding a layer of wood cells, usually consisting of thin-walled cells formed early in the growing season (called earlywood) and thicker-walled cells produced later in the growing season (called latewood). Trees usually stop growing at the end of fall and the difference between the earlywood and latewood is visible as the tree ring, usually extending around the entire circumference of the tree.

The width of the tree ring indicates how much the tree has grown in a particular growth season. The wider the ring, the better the conditions for growth.

By measuring the width of the rings from the trunks of the trees, the research team learned that the rings were smaller than average during the years 1587-1589 and during the years 1606-1612. (See "The Lost Colony of Roanoke," at the ScienceDaily website.)

Other studies, by professionals in different disciplines, may one day provide additional answers regarding the actual fate of the Roanoke Colonists. Stay tuned for more information!

Credits:

The image, at the top of the page, depicts a map of Roanoke Island and the Outer Banks of North Carolina. It is online via Wikimedia Commons.

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