

American History for Beginners

By Jennifer Dodrill

Week 3: Sir Walter Raleigh and Roanoke Island

Have you ever heard of the “Lost Colony”? The Lost Colony of Roanoke Island has been a mystery for 425 years. To learn more about it, you will need to become an explorer yourself! Imagine you are on a ship sent by Sir Walter Raleigh.

Destination—the New World!

A little background information is necessary before your trip: Walter Raleigh was born in England around 1552 to a wealthy merchant family. Some accounts of his life say he was homeschooled by his half-brother. He studied at Oxford University, served in the Huguenot army, and studied law. He was a good friend of [Queen Elizabeth I](#). There is a legend that one day the queen was traveling by coach through the streets. Raleigh was there, and when the queen stepped out of her coach, he threw his [cloak](#) over the mud puddles to keep her feet and skirts clean.

She gave him money and land, but when he wanted to sail to new countries to explore, the queen wouldn't let him go. She knighted him in 1585, making him Sir Walter Raleigh. He organized three different trips to America.



Historians don't agree on if Raleigh personally came to the New World. The first trip he organized was in 1578, and he (or the people he sent) scouted out the area of present-day North Carolina and south into Florida. He named the region "Virginia" in honor of his Queen Elizabeth, the "Virgin Queen," which means the queen who had never married.

He sent a second [expedition](#) of colonists to settle at Roanoke Island. After a difficult winter on the island, the colonists had problems with the nearby Indians and were also threatened by Spain. When Sir Francis Drake showed up to bring them supplies, they told him how hard their life was and he took them back to England in the summer of 1586.

In 1587, Raleigh sent another group, commanded by John White, to establish a colony in North America. This is the trip you are going on! Imagine there are men, women, and children—including you—on the ship. The ship is crowded, and the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean is long and often scary. Storms toss the ship around like a toy, and the waves make you sick to your stomach. You get hungry but also tired of the same food every day: hard biscuits, salted meat (kind of like jerky), cheese, sardines, and fish. There isn't much to do on the ship, but you make friends with the other children and play hide and seek and [jacks](#). Sometimes the sailors get mad at you for being in the way.

When you see land, you get so excited that you yell, "Land Ho!" Although Sir Walter Raleigh had ordered John White to stop in the Chesapeake Bay area, the group stops at Roanoke. White's daughter, Elenor, and her husband, Ananias Dare, are on the trip, too. Elenor has a baby at Roanoke and names her Virginia Dare. She is the first English child to be born in America, and you are proud when you get to hold her.

Not long after you settle in Roanoke, you notice the adults whispering and arguing. Then you realize it is too late to plant crops, and you wonder how you and your friends will live through the winter with no food. Since John White is the governor of the colony, he decides to sail back to England for supplies.

Here is where the mystery comes in. When Governor White was finally able to return to Roanoke in 1590, the island was deserted. There were no signs of any of the colonists, but there was one clue: “Croatoan” was carved into a fence post. Historians and archaeologists have worked for hundreds of years to figure out this mystery, and they have come up with a few different possibilities. Some wonder if the colonists moved south to live with the Croatoan Indians. In more recent years, researchers have studied tree rings from the Roanoke area, and they show that there was probably a horrible drought (a period of *very* dry weather) during the time the colonists lived in Roanoke. Maybe they moved away in search of a better place to live. Or a hurricane may have washed the town away and drowned the people. It is also possible that the Natives killed the colonists.

Activities:

So, what do you think happened? Draw a picture of what you think happened to the Lost Colony.

Learn how to play jacks!

Print to connect the dots to make a sailboat:

<https://www.coloring.ws/ctd/cdsailboat.gif>

Click [here](#) to see a 425-year-old map that may hold a clue to what happened to the Lost Colony.

The following document has lots of sketches and maps about the Roanoke Voyages and Sir Walter Raleigh’s “Virginia.”

<http://www.virginiahistoryseries.org/linked/unit%204.%20roanoke%20voyages%20and%20raleigh%20virginia.handout%20slides%201up.crop.pdf>

*** Please note: Pages 15–18 of this document contain images of Native Americans that wear very limited clothing and exposed body parts. Please preview these pages before sharing them with your child as all images may not be appropriate for your family. An alternative resource for information is: https://www.ducksters.com/history/colonial_america/lost_colony_of_roanoke.php.*