**Making Money in Jamestown**

When the Virginia Company established a colony at Jamestown in 1607, its leadership had high hopes that a wide array of materials could be produced. Company officials wrote, “The country is large and great . . . the land is full of minerals, plenty of woods. . .the soil is strong.” Initially investors hoped for precious materials such as the gold and silver found in Spanish America. When they found no precious metals and other materials, they began cutting lumber and manufacturing wood by-products. Some wood products earned small profits for the Company, but the high cost of transporting lumber discouraged production.

Two other industries which the Company hoped would succeed were silk-making and wine-making. Silkworms were sent to Virginia in 1614 and initially did well, but the 1622 war with the Powhatan Indians was disastrous for the industry. After that silk had little success. Colonists encouraged native grapes and sent Frenchmen to establish a wine industry along with the silk. In 1619, the Virginia General Assembly required settlers to grow mulberry trees to feed silkworms and to plant grape vines. Wine production continued in Virginia throughout the 17th century, but never produced a profit. Then came tobacco.

Tobacco was introduced to the Jamestown Colonists from Native Americans. Growing tobacco in Virginia was profitable for planters, but it required a large amount of land and a considerable labor force. The tobacco growing process was a year-round occupation. First, land was cleared for fields. Seeds were started in January. Harvesting, curing and packing of the leaves occurred in late summer and fall. With a small population in Virginia, planters sought workers from England, often paying their passage to the colony.

 The system of indentured servitude was the answer to the dilemma faced by the Virginia Company and private landowners. An indentured servant signed a contract agreeing to work for a fixed period—usually four to seven years—in return for meals, clothes, shelter and their passage to the colony. After 1616, most freed servants did not receive land and had to work for someone else, or as a tenant farmer, to acquire enough money to buy land. At least half of the European immigrants who came to Virginia between 1620 and 1680 arrived as indentured servants. But the high death rate of new European immigrants kept labor in short supply. As the century progressed, fewer Europeans wanted to come to Virginia, and as the number of European servants could not meet the demand for laborers, planters began to import Africans to work in their tobacco fields.

King James became king of England in 1603 after the death of Queen Elizabeth I of England. In 1606 King James I granted the Virginia Company of London a charter to establish a colony in Virginia. The hope was that the colony would furnish valuable raw materials to England so they would not have to be purchased from other countries. The colony would then become a market for England’s manufactured goods. King James himself was rather sickly, having crippling arthritis, weak limbs, abdominal colic, gout and a number of other chronic illnesses. Perhaps this could have affected his outlook on tobacco. In 1604, he wrote, “A Counterblaste to Tobacco,” which stated his strong feelings about the negative health effects of tobacco. His disapproval did not halt the popularity of tobacco. Consumption of tobacco in England actually increased, due in part to its supposed health benefits.

John Rolfe left England bound for Jamestown in May 1609. Once in Virginia, John Rolfe experimented with the planting of tobacco seeds he obtained from somewhere in the Caribbean. He gave some tobacco from his crop to friends, and they agreed that the new leaf was very pleasant and better than the Indian tobacco. Rolfe became a member of the House of Burgesses and continued his efforts to improve the quality and quantity of tobacco in Virginia which he viewed as the only successful way to make Jamestown a profitable colony.

1. What were some of the hopes of the Virginia Company when Jamestown was first settled in 1607?

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2. What were some of the early industries which were tried by the colonists? Why did they fail?

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3. What factors contributed to the success of tobacco as a cash crop?

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4. Although tobacco made a profit for both England and the planter landowners what were negative results of this success?

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5. Why did King James I not approve of Tobacco?

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6. Why did John Rolfe support the growing of tobacco?

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7. Who do you agree with? Why?

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