The Harsh Realities Behind Early Carolina's Promises

By: Andrew Smith

As you step off the *Samuel*, a ship that has carried you for nearly three months, the sands of Carolina feel fresh—almost divine. However, in the mid-1670s, reaching the illustrious Charles Town by longboat, you're shocked to see a measly half-dozen muddied, rustic homes, starkly contrasting the vivid descriptions of a hundred “good homes wholly made of wood” in Robert Horne’s pamphlet you were promised in London (Horne-68). Unfortunately, this was the reality for hundreds of settlers, but when they arrived, life turned out to be full of environmental difficulties, limited supplies, disease, and unstable relationships with the indigenous population.

In this land—new to European settlers—the environment was an unforeseen challenge. A prominent example was the coastline itself; rivers like the Cape Fear had many sandbars, making the water at entrances shallow with frequent shipwrecks (Hilton-38). Carolina’s terrain was also an issue, containing indomitable oaks over 60 feet tall. This left even the Indigenous people unable to remove these trees, forcing them to “Plant in the worst land,” as William Hilton puts it (Hilton-38). Although Robert Horne accurately describes the land as having “plenty of as rich ground as any in the world,” the several weeks of felling and fencing efforts it took to prepare a few acres of land for planting crops told a different story (Horne-68).

Another major obstacle for new settlers was disease. Even before landing on the shore of Carolina, many people contracted scurvy from a lack of essential minerals, often claiming the life of at least one passenger (Newe-181). Once there, Newe describes the most common disease for new arrivals: “seasoning.” It’s described as the illness people face as they adjust to the new climate, and Newe states, “most have a seasoning, but few dye of it,” alluding that it could

hinder intense labor but is recoverable (Newe-183). This series of sicknesses heavily contrasts Robert Hornes' promotional tactic of spreading propaganda, describing Carolina as one of the healthiest places in the world (Horne-66–67).

As more settlers came, there was a clear need for supplies in daily life. For tools, it was suggested that every man have an axe, bill, broad hoe, and grubbing hoe for maintaining the landscape (Wilson-164). Thomas Newe gives a realistic perspective of Carolina's resources in a letter to his father. He conveys contempt for Charles Town's unusually high cost of living, saying, "all things are very dear in the town," elaborating that milk costs 2d a quart and beef 4d a pound, leading to people drinking molasses water and salted pork (Newe-181). Additionally, there was a distinct lack of cash in the settlement, leading to a prominent bartering system trading "country" products as payment—leaving newcomers frustrated and struggling with only English money.

Newe, in his letters, also requests blue and white beads to trade with the indigenous population. The natives had access to venison, with many planters relying on that trade to eat (Newe-182). However, unlike Samuel Wilson's pamphlet "perfect friendship with the Indians," many people—including Newe—feared certain raider groups like the Westos, calling them "common enemies of mankind…man-eaters," to dehumanize and justify war (Wilson-165). Eventually, there were reports that the Westos had killed two planters, leading the English to ally with and arm a rival group, the Savannah Indians, in a proxy war . Wilson later describes the native population as "thin of people, and so divided" due to their dwindling population from these manufactured, internal wars (Wilson-168).

Similarly, Horne, throughout his pamphlet, exaggerates its boundless fertility, health, and profit to—implicitly—persuade Englishmen to migrate. Wilson uses powerful economic imagery, saying that "an Ox is raised at almost as little expense in Carolina, as a Hen is in England" and the notion that second sons and servants would be able to own hundreds of acres of land if they moved there (Wilson-167). While these texts were effective ways of recruitment, they created an expectation of a "Golden Age" that simply wasn't true.

Though many people succeeded and failed, Carolina was neither paradise nor disaster, rather a fragile experience that is reflected in these primary sources. These accounts not only spoke about the struggles that the common man endured but also how adapting and embracing the difference Carolina provided led to prosperity.

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