

The Tobacco Brides

If D.C. is America's heart, Jamestown is its cradle. The Virginia colony- the first permanent colony of America- began in 1607 with a contingent of 104 settlers, who were all male (National Park Service). In 1612, settler John Rolfe introduced a new strain of tobacco to the colony that was more resistant and productive. Having overcome the initial challenges of starting a colony- disease, and starvation- Jamestown shifted from focusing on survival to focusing on the new cash crop of tobacco. Tobacco was amazingly profitable, as it was shipped to England and sold at a high markup for recreational use. While the earlier Spanish and French colonizers had plundered the New World for gold and furs that could be stolen and shipped back to the European continent, the Jamestown colonizers could not simply steal tobacco and return to England. Instead, tobacco required a constant settlement devoted to farming the valuable crop. As the Virginia Company that owned Jamestown invested more money into the colony, they increasingly desired for the colony to become a permanent settlement. And so, women became necessary for Jamestown's success.

In 1619, Jamestown saw a novel idea: the immigration of young, unmarried women to a colony for marriage. This idea was proposed by Virginia Company Treasurer Edwin Sandys, who ordered that "...a fit hundredth might be sent of women, maids young and uncorrupt, to make wives to the inhabitants". The call for women was an economic decision: women would increase men's likeliness to stay and settle in the colony and allow for the colony's longevity. The costs of the brides were covered by their husbands, who would pay 150 pounds of tobacco leaf to the Virginia Company upon engagement (Zug). Because of this practice, these women are referred to as "tobacco brides".

Despite men paying for their engagement, the women who came to Jamestown did not do so under duress and were not sold to Jamestown. On the contrary, the Virginia Company ensured that the women who came to Jamestown did so of their own free will to reduce any chance of women convincing the Jamestown men to return to England. It was not difficult to convince women to immigrate to Jamestown; marriage was an expensive endeavor; many working-class women spent years working in domestic service before they married. Immigrating to Jamestown offered women their pick of well-off husbands and financial incentives, too, as they were provided household goods, free transportation to Jamestown, and land (Zug).

The women who came to Jamestown did so seeking economic opportunity and social status that would be unimaginable in England. Almost all of the brides were of modest, working-class backgrounds, yet chosen carefully for their “good character” (Zug). They hailed from across England- from urban London to Salisbury to Herefordshire (Potter). These women were young, and many were orphans or widows (Zug). The first dozen tobacco brides embarked for the New World from the Isle of Wight; the others from Gravesend on the Thames River (Potter). The women faced a months-long journey to the Jamestown colony. Upon arrival in Jamestown, they would be housed by the Virginia Company as they met with various suitors before accepting a proposal (Zug). This was markedly different from England, where women were outnumbered by men and lacked leverage in negotiating marriage terms (Zug). After marriage, these tobacco brides took on the duties of motherhood and running a domestic household.

Victoria Hall

The tobacco brides of Jamestown defied typical 17th-century gender norms by crossing continents and choosing their own husbands. Their legacy can be seen in the legal status women have held in America. Where in England, women were subject to “coverture”- having no legal identity of their own and being under the control of a male- some American women first held feme sole status, or legal personhood, in 1712 (California State University). This independent legal status reflects the legacy of independent women in America. Yet today, the tobacco brides of Jamestown are most remembered today for nurturing the first colony into a home, transforming Jamestown from a temporary settlement to the birthplace of America.

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