

A Jamestown settler describes life in Virginia, 1622

Introduction

The first English settlers in Jamestown, Virginia, who arrived in 1607, were eager to find gold and silver. Instead they found sickness and disease. Eventually, these colonists learned how to survive in their new environment, and by the middle of the seventeenth century they discovered that their fortunes lay in growing tobacco.

This 1622 letter from Jamestown colonist Sebastian Brandt to Henry Hovener, a Dutch merchant living in London, provides a snapshot of the colony in flux. Brandt, who likely arrived in 1619 in a wave of 1,200 immigrants, writes of his wife's and brother's deaths the previous year almost in passing. He mentions that, due to his own illness, he "was not able to travell up and downe the hills and dales of these countries but doo nowe intend every daye to walke up and downe the hills for good Mineralls here is both golde silver and copper." Most of Brandt's letter is devoted to its real purpose: putting in orders for cheese, vinegar, tools, spices, and other assorted goods from the London Company that were not available in Virginia. Interestingly, he promises to pay in tobacco and furs—not in the gold and copper he's looking for.

We know little about Brandt. He does not appear in any known existing official records, and historians presume he died not long after writing this letter. The glimpse he offers into early Jamestown serves as a tantalizing example of the challenges and thrills of studying colonial American history.

Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer these questions.

1. Carefully view the printable image of the document. Describe the skills an archivist needs to transform an original document into a format we can understand.
2. In the very first sentence of Sebastian Brandt's letter he mentions that his "brother and . . . wyfe are dead aboute a year" and does not mention them again. How does this matter-of-fact statement help us understand conditions faced by settlers in Virginia in the early 1600s?
3. What conclusions can you draw about Brandt knowing that he continued to search for precious metals after most Jamestown settlers were involved in agriculture?

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4. Make a list of what you think you would need to survive a year in Jamestown. Compare it with the shopping list Brandt sent to the merchant in London.

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Image

My beloved good friends Henry Hovener
 my commendations remembered, & hartely wishe
 your welfare for god so thanked I am
 now in good health, but my brother and
 my wyfe are dead about a yeare past
 And touching the busynesse that I came
 hither to doeing hath performed, by reason of
 my sickness & weakness I was not able
 to travel by and downe the hills and valleys
 of these countries but doe now intend every
 daye to walke by and downe the hills
 for good Minerales here is to be found
 silver and copper to be had and therefore
 I will doe my endeavour by the grace of
 god to effect what I am able to performe
 And I intreat you to bestow the Fifth
 part of your Company in my voyage to
 grant me my freedom to be sent hither
 to me I doubt not to doe well & good
 profits in these countries humbly desiringe
 you also to provide me some experimentes
 of iron & a strong voye to assiste me in
 my busynesse, and that it maye please a
 fewe aforesaid Company to send me at my request

Sebastian Brandt to Henry Hovener, January 13, 1622 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00708)

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Transcript

Sebastian Brandt to Henry Hovener, January 13, 1622 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00708)

Well beloved good friend Henry Hovener

My comendations remembred, I hartely [wish] your welfare for god be thanked I am now in good health, but my brother and my wyfe are dead aboute a yeare pass'd And touchinge the busynesse that I came hither is nothing yett performed, by reason of my sicknesse & weaknesse I was not able to travell up and downe the hills and dales of these countries but doo nowe intend every daye to walke up and downe the hills for good Mineralls here is both golde silver and copper to be had and therefore I will doe my endeavour by the grace of god to effect what I am able to performe And I intreat you to beseeche the Right Hon: & Wor: Company in my behalfe to grant me my freedome to be sent either to me I dowbte not to doo well & good service in these countries humbly desyringe them also to provyde me some [appointed] fellowe & a strong boye to assiste me in my busynesse, and that it may please the aforesaid Company to send me at my charge [2] a bed wth a bolster and cover and some Linnen for shirtes and sheetes. Sixe fallinge bands wth Last Size pairs of shoes twoo pairs of bootes three pairs of cullered stockings and garters wth three pairs of lether gloves some powder and shott twoo little runletts of oyle and vinnegar some spice & suger to comfort us here in our sicknesse abowte ffyftie pounds weight of holland and Englishe cheese together, Lykewyse some knyves, spoons, combes and all sortes of cullerd beads as you knowe the savage Indians use Also one Rundlett wth all sortes of yron nayles great and small, three haire sives, two hatchetts wth twoo broad yrons and some Allum And send all these necessaries thinges in a dry fatt wth the first shippinge dyrected unto M^r. Pontes in James Towne here in Virginia And whatsoever this all costes I will not onely wth my moste humble service but also wth some good Tobacco Bevor and Otterskins and other commodities here to be had recompence the Company for the same [3] And yf you could send for my brother Phillipps Sonne in Darbesheere to come hether itt [were] a great commoditie ffor me or suche another used in minerall workes And thus I comitt you to the Almighty.

Virginia 13 January 1622

Sebastian Brandt

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[*docket*]

Sebastian Brands lettre

To M^r Hofener 13, January 1622/3

That ther is Mynes of Gould

and Silver and Copper in

Virginia

Notes: **Sebastian Brandt's** origins are obscure. His name does not appear in any of the regularly consulted records of Virginia – he never served on any juries and was never an official of any kind. It is possible that he was of the Brandt family of shipbuilders of Topsham in Devonshire, England. It seems that Brandt was lured to Virginia by exaggerated reports of the gold and silver to be found there and that he spent at least a year there because of the references to his wife and brother, but no more than a year because of his comment about his illness. It is also possible that he could have arrived in 1619 when 1,200 settlers arrived at Jamestown. He could have died from this illness or he could have returned to England once he realized there was no gold. The reference to “Mr. Pontes” was to John Pountis (also spelled Powntis and Powntes) who was the Admiral of the Jamestown district. Pountis would have been responsible for receiving goods from England.