

The

MASSACHUSETTS

CALIFORNIA

How could
an entire village of
people just disappear?

BY ALLISON FRIEDMAN

ILLUSTRATION BY SHANE REBENSCHIED

Ten-year-old Robert Ellis could hardly believe it. It was July 1587. And he and his dad were finally here: America! Back home in England, most people had only heard stories about this dazzling land.

The journey across the ocean from England had taken two months. The trip was not easy. Rats nipped at people's toes. Human waste sloshed around the bottom of the ship. If you dunked into the ocean for a bath, you might get bitten by



Knowledge Building As you read, look for information that tells you what America was like before and after Europeans arrived.

LOOK FOR WORD NERD'S 10 TERMS IN BOLD



THEY

of Roanoke

a shark. (This had actually happened to someone.)

But when Robert stepped onshore, he forgot about the awful trip. He was standing in a place of beauty. Golden beaches sloped down to glittering water. Thick forests hummed with the sound of frogs. This was Roanoke, a tiny island off the coast of what the English called Virginia. (Today, it's part of North Carolina.)

Robert, his dad, and about 115 other people had come here for an important

mission: to start a **colony**, a little piece of England in America. They would build a village. They would set up farms. And they would gather treasures to send back home—furs, fruit, spices, maybe even gold.

But if Robert had known what would soon happen on Roanoke, he might have jumped back on the ship and sailed home to England.

Within three years, he and the other **colonists** would vanish.

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Many Wonders

For a kid like Robert living in 1587, going to America must have seemed

almost like going to the moon. Just 100 years before, people in Europe hadn't known North and South America existed. It wasn't until the early 1500s that they found out: Amazing lands lay across the Atlantic Ocean.

Few could have imagined the wonders of **the New World**, as they called it. Tree after tree stretched as far as the eye could see. Tall mountains seemed to touch the clouds. Wildflowers bloomed in bright colors. And the animals! There were buffalo and beavers. There were grizzly bears and salmon. There were so many flying geese that they blocked out the sun.

European countries like Spain, Portugal, France, and England wanted to seize the riches of this New World. Kings and queens sent **explorers** there: Christopher Columbus, John Cabot, Ferdinand Magellan. Tales of their journeys spread across Europe.

A Better Life

By the time Robert was born, in the late 1500s, explorers weren't the only ones going to America. Ordinary Europeans had started moving there to form colonies. These **settlers** built new towns. They also collected (and sometimes stole) natural treasures. Spain had already grown rich off its many colonies. It had become the



most powerful nation in the world. England decided to set up its own colony.

At the time, London, England, was crowded and filthy. Like many others, Robert and his dad probably lived in a tiny home. Only rich people owned land and large houses. And if you weren't born rich, you had almost no chance of ever achieving these things.

But if you joined England's colony, your life would change. You could get at least 500 **acres** of land in America. That was an area 25 times the size of the queen's palace! To Robert and his dad, that would have seemed like something out of a dream.

And so the Ellises signed on to join the



America in 1587

We created these maps to help you understand the location of Roanoke. But a real map from 1587 would look very different. Back then, America was not a country. There were no states. Native peoples spoke of places in their own languages. In Europe, people had begun using the name *America* less than 100 years before. The name honors a man named Amerigo Vespucci, an explorer from Italy. He was the first European to understand that North and South America were separate continents.

As you look at this map, think about all the ways America has changed over the past 400 years.



At that time, millions of **Native peoples** were living across America. They were members of hundreds of different tribes. Some had lived here for as long as 30,000 years. There were the Mississippians, who built a grand city

English colony. They wanted to start a better life in the New World.

Grave Danger

But as Robert would soon find out, the New World wasn't really new. The 500 acres that he and his dad were promised? That land was not England's to give. It already belonged to other people.

When the settlers arrived on Roanoke Island, some 7,000 Native American people were living in that area. Most belonged to **tribes** that were part of a big group known as the Algonquian. Members of these tribes had settled in the area nearly 1,000 years before. The Algonquian called this land Ossomocomuck.

filled with soaring pyramid-like structures in the Midwest. There were the Ancestral Puebloans, who had lived in a castle-style building built into a mountain in today's Colorado. And there were the Inuit, in Alaska, who glided through icy waters in sleek boats called kayaks [KYE-acks].

The Algonquian near Roanoke were expert hunters. They shot deer with arrows. They speared fish from the ocean. They were skilled farmers too. They grew corn, beans, and squash. During a good harvest, they would hold big celebrations around a fire.

But European explorers and settlers had put the Algonquian and other Native peoples in grave danger. Thousands were killed in

BILDAGENTUR ZOOMAR GMBH/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (BACKGROUND)

fight over food, land, and natural riches. Thousands more died from diseases like measles, spread by the Europeans.

So when the settlers arrived on Roanoke, most Algonquian in the area did not trust English people. Gathering berries and acorns from the woods, an Algonquian girl might have seen the Europeans building their cottages. Her heart would likely have frozen in terror. She would have worried that the new settlers would bring more trouble.

Only one tribe would speak with the newcomers: the Croatoan. This tribe lived on an island of the same name, just south of Roanoke.

Worried Whispers

Within a few weeks of arriving, Robert began to hear whispers. The adult settlers were worried.

The settlers were in trouble. They hadn't brought enough food or supplies. And they had few Algonquian **allies** to trade with. They would barely be able to survive the winter. They begged the colony's leader, John White, to return to England and bring back help.

At first, White refused. His daughter, Eleanor Dare, was one of the colonists. She had just given birth to a baby girl—Virginia, the first English child born in America. How could White leave his family?

White finally agreed to go. But he made the settlers promise: If they moved anywhere else, they would carve the name of the place into a tree or post so White could find them when he returned. And if they were in danger, they would add a carving of a cross.

Then White boarded a ship back to Europe.



Without a Trace

In England, White faced a number of delays. By the time he got back to Roanoke, three years had passed. He imagined the settlers waiting for him on the island, hungry and afraid. And that was if they were even still alive.

In August 1590, White arrived on Roanoke. He rushed toward the place where the colonists had built their cottages three years before.

What he saw stopped him in his tracks. Where there was once a village, there was now only an empty clearing. Almost every trace of the settlers was gone. White almost sank to his knees in despair.

Then he saw it: the word "Croatoan" carved into a wooden fence post. There was no cross to signal danger. Had the settlers simply moved to the island where their friends the Croatoan lived?

White and the crew sailed toward Croatoan to find out. But a hurricane hit. Raging winds pushed the ships out to sea. They could not get to the island.

John White would never learn what had happened to his family.

Haunting Clues

For the past 400 years, the disappearance of the colonists has puzzled people. Were they killed in fights with the Algonquian? Did they try to sail back to England and get lost at sea? Or did they live happily ever after on Croatoan?

Experts have found little to answer these questions. But there have been a few clues.

Nearly 20 years after the settlers vanished, England started a new colony called Jamestown. It was



not far from Roanoke. From a group of Algonquian, the new colonists heard about people nearby who wore English clothes and lived in English-style houses. The Jamestown colonists searched. But they never found these English people.

More recently, teams of **archaeologists** have searched areas around Roanoke, including Croatoan. They've dug up items that belonged to the Algonquian: arrowheads, bits of pottery, fine copper jewelry. These finds have helped them learn more about the cultures of Ossomocomuck.

The teams have also found items that may have belonged to English people in the 1500s. But they haven't found enough to say for sure where the Roanoke settlers ended up.

Mystery Solved?

And that might be the key to the mystery. Today, many experts believe that the Roanoke colonists may have split up and been welcomed into different Algonquian tribes. We don't know exactly what happened. But we can imagine.

Robert may have traded in his woolen pants and leather shoes for a deerskin wrap and moccasins. The Algonquian may have shown him how to use a bow and arrow to hunt. They may have taught him how to speak their language. Robert and the other colonists may have gone through these changes quickly, leaving almost no trace of their English ways. That might be why there

are few clues for archaeologists to find today.

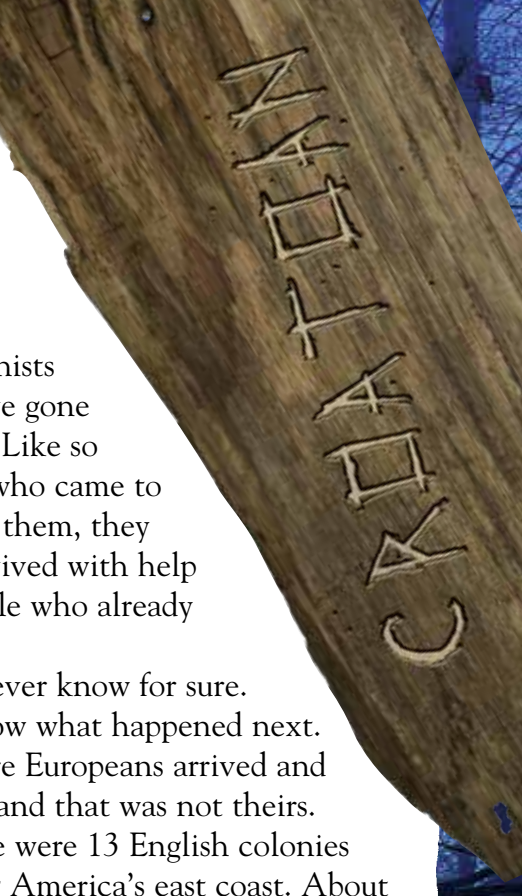
In other words, the Roanoke colonists might not have gone missing at all. Like so many people who came to America after them, they may have survived with help from the people who already lived here.

We will never know for sure. But we do know what happened next. More and more Europeans arrived and laid claim to land that was not theirs. By 1733, there were 13 English colonies lined up along America's east coast. About 50 years later, these 13 colonies would break away from England to become the United States.

As this new country was forming, Native people across America were forced from their homes and farms. Millions suffered starvation, disease, and violence. One hundred years after the Europeans arrived, as many as 90 percent of Native peoples in the Americas had died.

Many Algonquian peoples of the east coast were among them. But some survived. Today, the Algonquian are a major Native group in North America.

As for the Roanoke settlers? Their fate will likely remain a mystery forever. ■



WRITE TO WIN

Write a conversation between Robert and a Croatoan child, in which they introduce themselves and describe where they're from. Bring them to life with details from the article! Send it to "Roanoke Contest" by Dec. 1. Ten winners will each receive *Blood on the River* by Elisa Carbone. See page 2 for details.

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