



A New World: England's First View of America

July 15 through
October 15, 2008

Jamestown Settlement and **Yorktown Victory Center** living-history museums are administered by the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, an educational institution of the Commonwealth of Virginia. The mission of the Foundation, which is accredited by the American Association of Museums, is to educate and to promote understanding and awareness of Virginia's role in the creation of the United States of America.

Jamestown Settlement explores the world of America's first permanent English colony and the Powhatan, English and west central African cultures that converged in 17th-century Virginia. The Yorktown Victory Center interprets the impact of the American Revolution on the people of America and the development of the new nation.

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*16th-century
watercolor
drawings by
John White
from the
British
Museum*



COVER: Detail from *An Indian Werowance, or Chief*.
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J A M E S T O W N S E T T L E M E N T

A New World

In the 1580s, Sir Walter Raleigh sent several expeditions to North America. He claimed the country they explored for England and named it “Virginia” in tribute to Queen Elizabeth I. John White, a gentleman and artist, accompanied five of these voyages. His watercolors provided the Elizabethan court with its first view of America – a view that shaped the European perspective for more than 200 years.

White sailed on one of the first voyages to Virginia in 1585, to an area that is part of modern-day North Carolina, and recorded what he saw in a series of remarkable watercolors. He presented them, mounted in an album, to an unknown patron at the Elizabethan court – possibly Raleigh, the Queen or one of her advisors. Today, they are an incomparable record of America’s natural resources and native society as they were when the Old and New Worlds first met.



The manner of their fishing

The Artist’s Role in New World Exploration

John White’s role in providing a visual record of the 1585 voyage to Virginia was a very important one. Before the invention of photography, the artist’s ability to draw or paint pictures of what he saw was the only tool explorers had for recording visual information about new lands and peoples. Once these paintings and drawings came back to Europe, they were turned into woodcuts or engravings so that they could be printed in books.

White was not the first artist to provide images of the New World. Artists had accompanied other, earlier expeditions to North and South America by the Spanish, Portuguese and French. John White’s album contained pictures of some indigenous American peoples he never saw himself. These pictures were copied from the work of the French artist Jacques Le Moyne, who had visited Florida 20 years before.

Recording Plants and Animals in the New World

On the voyage to Virginia, John White was instructed to draw all strange plants and animals and bring home as many as possible. These natural wonders were not recorded simply because they were exotic and new; they were important because they were part of God’s creation. White’s watercolors also were made for practical reasons. Future expeditions needed to know how to recognize edible species and what crops would grow. It was not always possible to bring home live specimens, and plants and animals often change color and shape after death. White’s watercolors were a vital record of their living appearance and essential for accurate identification.

Although John White’s drawings of the people, animals and plants of coastal North Carolina constitute the most famous part of his work, his natural history drawings from the West Indies made up a substantial section of the album.



Pineapple

Tiger swallowtail butterfly



The West Indies

Sir Walter Raleigh dispatched a fleet of seven ships on the 1585 voyage to establish a colony. After six weeks at sea, the ships needed to stock up with fresh water and reprovision when they arrived in the West Indies. In Puerto Rico, White recorded pineapples, mamee apples and plantains. He noted that they would make useful crops for future colonists to collect and attempt to grow in Virginia. Birds, crabs and iguana were abundant and edible. Insects had to be recorded carefully. Some, such as fireflies, were merely curiosities, while others, such as scorpions for example, were deadly.

John White's watercolors of the fish of the Atlantic originally imitated the shiny iridescence of the live fish. Sadly the expensive pigments he used to do this often contained lead and have chemically altered with time. They have turned black and grey where they were once silver, white and blue.

The Indians of Coastal North Carolina

During the 1585 voyage, John White produced the first visual records of the Indians who lived in the place we know today as North Carolina. Manteo and Wanchese, two Indians who had been brought to England on the previous fact-finding voyage of 1584, were available to act as witnesses and translators of the Old World to the New.

White's watercolors and his companion Thomas Harriot's written account tell us about the Indians' dress, weapons, villages, government and religion. They provide us with an invaluable record of the complex and sophisticated culture of these people, the North Carolina Algonquians.

But the record was not a detached unbiased one. Harriot and White's main purpose was to encourage potential investors and colonists. White's depictions of the players and stage settings of the New World were composed with this propaganda in mind.



Wife of a chief of Pomeiooc and her daughter

Expedition to the Indian Towns

Expedition leader Richard Grenville's ship and the colony's supplies were damaged when they landed on the North Carolina coast in July 1585, which left them dependent on the local Indians for provisions. A party of 60 men, including White and Harriot with Manteo as interpreter, set out for the mainland. They visited Pomeiooc, Aquascogoc and Secotan, where White made his watercolors and Harriot his written record of the people and their way of life.

White and Harriot were at pains to show an abundant country inhabited by civilized and friendly people. The Indians exhibit none of the terrifying savagery White depicted in his images of the Picts and ancient Britons of England's own past. When John White's watercolors were brought back to Britain, they were copied as line engravings by Theodor de Bry. The de Bry versions of the White images were published, along with Harriot's written account, in 1590.

John White's Theater of the World

John White did not confine his activities as an artist to the peoples he met on the Virginia voyages. He had a lively interest in the diversity of humankind and produced many images of people of other



The town of Secotan

cultures. Some of these drawings are costume studies in which the emphasis is on the exotic clothing rather than the person pictured. Others are carefully recorded images of non-European people that qualify as serious ethnographic records.

One group of drawings show three Inuit people who had been brought to England by explorer Martin Frobisher from his unsuccessful voyage to find a Northwest Passage around America to Asia. Other watercolors by John White show people wearing costumes of Europe and the Middle East, as well as Picts and Britons from England's past. They are drawn with their weapons and attributes, posed as actors on a stage.

Who was John White?

In this exhibition, England's first view of America is examined through the watercolors of John White. Unfortunately very little is known of White's life and training as an artist.

A man named John White was employed by the Office of the Revels in 1579, and a John White is listed as a member of the Painter Stainers Company in 1580, but it cannot be proven that either of them was our John White.

Most of the information that survives about White relates to the period 1584-90, when he was involved in Sir Walter Raleigh's Virginia voyages. He made five voyages to Virginia and in 1587 was governor of the Roanoke colony in North Carolina. He died sometime after 1593.



Turkish man with a curved sword



Pictish woman

In "A New World: England's First View of America," John White's watercolors are on public display as an entire

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group for the first time in four decades. All of the more than 70 watercolors are in the collection of the British Museum, where the exhibition opened in 2007 before traveling to the North Carolina Museum of History, the Yale Center for British Art and, finally, Jamestown Settlement.

White's depictions of the Algonquian-speaking people of the coastal region that is part of modern North Carolina were an important resource in the development of Jamestown Settlement's permanent gallery exhibits and outdoor re-created Powhatan Indian village.

Lecture Series

An exhibition lecture series features guest speakers on three Saturdays at 7 p.m. in Jamestown Settlement's Robins Foundation Theater:

July 19 – "Roanoke's Achievement" – Karen Ordahl Kupperman, Silver Professor of History at New York University.

August 9 – "Tassentasse in Tsenacomoco: Native People and the English" – Daniel K. Richter, Richard S. Dunn Director of the McNeil Center for Early American Studies and Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania.

September 20 – "Painting in Elizabethan England: John White in Context" – Karen Hearn, Curator of 16th- and 17th-Century British Art at Tate Britain in London.

Admission to the lectures is free, and advance reservations are recommended by contacting (757) 253-4415 or rsvp.lecture@jyf.virginia.gov.