

COMPANY CHARTERS AND CHALLENGES

When the Virginia Company of London began planning for its new colony in Virginia in 1607, leaders developed a “wish list.” Over a period of 17 years, King James I granted several charters to the Company, establishing an English claim in the New World and outlining how the plan should be implemented. The Company itself produced numerous documents setting out what they hoped to do with land in the New World and instructing colonists in how to accomplish those goals.

The Company’s goals included looking for riches such as gold and silver found by the Spanish to the south; challenging Spain’s domination of the New World by getting a piece of it for England and thus extending the bounds of English civilization; tapping the New World for its resources—timber, iron, minerals, gems, medicinal plants; tapping its potential to support industries such as glassmaking, iron working, wood processing, pitch and tar manufacture, silk and wine industries, in order to make England self sufficient and eliminating reliance on foreign imports; finding a northwest passage to the other sea and to the riches of the East Indies; converting the Indians to Christianity; and creating jobs for England’s unemployed.

How did they go about trying to achieve these goals? First, they moved into a land already occupied by the Powhatan Indians and claimed it for their own king, seemingly oblivious to the fact that there already was a paramount chief who claimed the land for his people. The English even forced Chief Powhatan to take a crown and robe, symbolizing his subservience to their king. They began to take the land’s resources for their own needs without apparent consideration for the needs of the Indians. When they could not survive on their own, they traded trinkets and beads with the Indians for food, particularly corn and venison. They relied on this method of obtaining food for the first few years, since their own supplies were never adequate.



The first charter established a seven-man council in Virginia to carry Company directives. Internal squabbles, deceit and death reduced this body to a mere few and finally only one after the first year. Accompanying documents also instructed the colonists not to settle in a low moist location, a directive they did not follow because they liked the location of the peninsula on which they built James Fort. They also were told not to let the sailors spoil their trade with the Indians, but it did not take long before the sailors had their own trade going, which devalued Company goods brought for bartering for food. Leaders did little or nothing to convert the Powhatan Indians to Christianity.

After the colonists had been in Virginia a few years, the Company received a second charter. This one called for a sole governor who led with a group of appointed advisors. The instructions that accompanied this 1609 document called for the establishment of a new settlement upriver in a location that was considered healthier. Two other settlements would soon be added, one downriver, and another upriver. So the English moved out beyond their initial settlement into areas along the James River and onto lands occupied by Powhatan people, pushing many of the Indians off their prime lands along the water courses which they used for their subsistence and transportation. When more colonists continued to arrive with little food to support them, the leaders became more aggressive in demanding and taking food from the Indians who had little to give, due to a major drought in the area.

This aggression resulted in two periods of tension and warfare during the Virginia Company’s tenure in the colony. The second of these in 1622 caused the deaths of about 340 settlers, or more than one-fourth of the colonists.

Company officials also became discouraged when their various economic attempts failed. They did not find the gold, silver or even minerals they thought would be available. The glass furnace did not produce much. The Company brought in foreign experts to develop wood, silk and wine industries, but silk and wine failed and it was costly to transport large pieces of wood products back to England. The Company was not succeeding at its profit-making ventures. Tobacco would be the colony’s saving grace, but not because of anything the Company did to establish it. Some settlers made a profit through the fur trade as well.

The second (1609) and third (1612) charters also tried to find ways to raise more money to support the Virginia Company. Company leaders found that just asking wealthy people to contribute, as under the first charter of 1607, was not working at bringing in enough financial support. So, under the 1609 charter, shares of stock were sold to anyone who could afford them, at 12 pounds 10 shillings. Under the 1612 charter, the King gave the Company the power to run lotteries in London and surrounding towns, selling lottery tickets to raise money. But not enough people bought shares of stock and not enough bought lottery tickets. So the Company floundered, not able to purchase enough of the goods and services needed to supply its colony in Virginia.

Some items on the wish list—finding precious metals or minerals, developing profit-making ventures, finding a northwest passage to the Orient, converting the Indians to Christianity, did not happen. Others hopes were achieved in some fashion—England did get a piece of the New World to exploit, they did find natural resources for the taking, and individuals did find a way to make a profit for themselves (not for the Company) through tobacco and the fur trade. But all of these advances came at a price to the Powhatan Indians who already lived in Virginia.

OTHER SOURCES

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