

EARLY INDUSTRIES IN VIRGINIA

When the Virginia Company established a colony at Jamestown in 1607, its leadership had high hopes that a wide array of materials could be tapped or produced. Company officials wrote, “The country it selfe is large and great . . . the land is full of milneralles, plenty of woods (the wants of England). . .the soile is strong and lustie of its owne nature.” Initially investors hoped for precious materials such as the gold and silver found in Spanish America. They also sought raw materials that were badly needed in England, and they further planned to manufacture items that could turn a profit for the Company investors. They wanted the colony to supply products that could make England self-sufficient and not reliant upon other countries.

For the first seven years, colonists tapped resources and struggled to find products that could be exported successfully to English markets. When they found no precious metals and other materials, they began cutting lumber and manufacturing wood by-products. Virginia’s forests promised a wide variety of types of wood for building ships and English houses, and for furniture and barrels. The settlers also collected sassafras for medicinal purposes. In 1608 the Company sent Polish and German craftsmen to Jamestown, some of whom made potash for soap and glass production, pine tar and pitch for shipbuilding. Some wood products earned small profits for the Company, but the high cost of transporting lumber discouraged production.

Because Virginia possessed the natural ingredients for glass—sand, wood ashes and lime—the Company hoped that glass production in Virginia would help meet the growing demand in England. They wanted the Polish and German immigrants to establish a glasshouse about a mile from James Fort. But little glass was produced there, and the industry soon collapsed. Although it was revived again in 1621 when Italian glassmakers were imported to produce trade beads, this venture also failed.

Two other industries which the Company hoped would succeed were silk-making and wine-making. England imported silk from the Orient and southern Europe, and wine from France and Spain, all at great expense. The English hoped to establish their own sources of these products in their colony. Silkworms were sent to Virginia in 1614 and initially flourished, and Frenchmen were sent to produce the silk. But the 1622 war with the Powhatan Indians was disastrous for the industry, and, although attempts were made at silk production over the next 50 years, they met with little success.

Colonists encouraged native grapes and sent Frenchmen to establish a wine industry along with the silk. In 1619, the Virginia General Assembly required settlers to grow mulberry trees to feed silkworms and to plant grape vines. Wine production continued in Virginia throughout the 17th century, but never produced a profit.

In addition to glass, silk and wine, promoters encouraged the production of other industries, including iron, perfumes, medicines, dyes, hemp, flax and salt. An early iron-working experiment failed. In 1621 the Company established an ironworks upriver at Falling Creek, but it was destroyed in the 1622 war with the Powhatan Indians. Colonists established salt-works on the Eastern Shore in 1614, but they failed by 1620. Virginians would continue to attempt both iron and salt production throughout the century. The attempts to produce the other items yielded little.

One enterprise that did produce a small profit for colonists was the fur trade. Early colonists described the abundance of fur-bearing animals in the colony. In 1611 Sir Thomas Dale related that he hoped to establish “a trade of furs, to be obtained with the savages in the northern rivers.” Samuel Argall established a fur trade with the Indians on the Potomac River and a more elaborate trade in furs, particularly beaver, began around 1620. The Virginia Company hoped to become as successful in the trade as the Dutch and French had been in the Hudson and Delaware River areas and Canada. In 1631 William Claiborne established a trading post at the head of the Chesapeake Bay. Within a few years, traders licensed by Maryland and Virginia successfully operated in the Chesapeake fur trade.

Although furs did become a successful commodity a little later in the 17th century, during the Virginia Company’s tenure in the colony the settlers were not able to find commodities that produced a profit for Company shareholders. Over the first few years almost everything the Company tried ended in failure. John Rolfe arrived in Virginia in 1610, and knew that smokers in England enjoyed the tobacco coming from the Spanish colonies to the south. He obtained some of the seed and began planting it in Virginia. Tobacco’s success soared almost immediately-- the colony had finally found its “gold.”

OTHER SOURCES

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