



A Shipwreck in Bermuda

The Story Behind William Shakespeare's "The Tempest"

By Jerry James

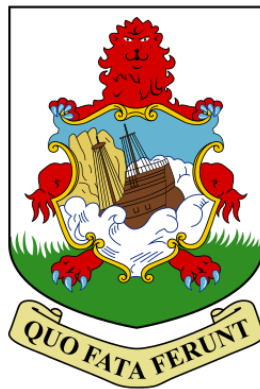
Safely in harbor

Is the King's ship. In the deep nook, where once

Thou called'st me up at midnight to fetch dew

From the still-vexed Bermoothes, there she's hid...

– Ariel in *The Tempest*, Act I, Scene 1



The Seal of Bermuda

"Whither the Fates Carry [Us]"

Yes, that's the "Sea Venture"

On July 29, 1609, the English ship *Sea Venture* was deliberately beached on a reef off Bermuda, thereby saving the lives of its 150 passengers. One of those passengers, William Strachey, later wrote how, just a week from their destination, "a dreadful storm and hideous began to blow," a storm that "beat all light from Heaven" – a "hurricano," a "tempest!" St. Elmo's Fire danced around the rigging, as if it were a sprite. The hold of the ship filled with 9 feet of water, leaving no alternative to beaching on the "Isle of Devils, that all men did shun as Hell and Perdition..."

The *Sea Venture* was the flagship of a fleet of 9 vessels sailing to the relief of the beleaguered English colony of Jamestown. The Virginia "plantation" was England's last, best hope to wrest some part of the Americas away from Spain, its hated rival in wealth and religion. Now what?

No one knew Virginia's salvation lay in another of the *Sea Venture*'s passengers, John Rolfe. But before we get to his story – via John Smith and Pocahontas – let's examine the tale of Jamestown, founded in 1607. And we will certainly return to William Strachey, a shareholder in the Children of the Revels at the Blackfriars Theatre in London, who among his friends numbered Ben Jonson. And perhaps – just perhaps – William Shakespeare.

1607



*Map of Virginia (North at right)
There's the Pacific, just over those hills...*

In 1607, Spain led England in colonizing the Americas by more than 100 years. While Spanish galleons brought home gold and silver, the best the English could do was to pirate some of it. Their colony on Roanoke Island, off the Carolina coast, (1587) had disappeared without a trace.

Just as money determined Spain's colonies, so would it determine England's. Jamestown would not be a royal colony, but rather a capitalist one, financed by a joint stock company. Oh, the Crown would commission the Virginia Company (1606) and take a cut of their profits, but it would not risk a farthing of its own.

The 3 ships that reached Virginia on April 26, 1607, had these major remits:

- (1) Settle where you can defend against the Spanish.
- (2) Find gold.

“James Towne” would be set on a peninsula, both easily defended and uninhabited. The English did not realize the significance of the latter. The native peoples of the Powhatan Confederacy had stayed away because nothing would grow there.

Jamestown stood on a mosquito-infested swamp with no fresh water. Settlers had brought with them typhoid, malaria and the plague. Dysentery ran rife. But there was

gold! Great amounts of earth were dug out and shipped to England to encourage further migration. It was iron pyrite – Fool's Gold. Still, the Powhatans spoke of a great sea, just over a ridge of hills. Surely, the route to Asia was open! (No, it wasn't.)

During the summer, too many sought gold, while too few planted crops. Half of the 105 colonists were dead by October. Only 35 would survive the winter.

1608

When the First Resupply arrived at Jamestown on January 2, 1608, they were stunned. They expected to find a thriving colony. Instead, they found, as John Smith wrote, “There were never Englishmen left in a foreign country in such misery as we were in this new discovered Virginia.”

While the 100 new settlers were trying to process all of this, a fire burned down most of the fort, including clothing and food. Worse, the ship would stay for 14 months and then sail back to England with another load of Fool's Gold – and a lot of the food.



*Captain John Smith
(c. 1579-1631)*

John Smith had made trouble since sailing on the first voyage, even though he was named to the governing council. The man – who was *not* a gentleman – simply didn't seem to know his place! At one point, he was even going to be hanged.

Smith had been enslaved by the Turks, before he killed his owner and made his way back to England via Russia. Ergo, he was not to be impressed by rank or title. Smith even sent a “rude reply” back to London asking for “...carpenters, husbandmen, gardeners, blacksmiths, masons...”

The Pocahontas thing? *Maybe.*



Pocahontas Saves Captain John Smith

In October 1608, the Second Resupply arrived, including the first women. And Smith was elected president of the council.

Things changed. Smith issued his famous order, taken from 2 Thessalonians, 3:10: “He that will not work, shall not eat.” In addition, he muscled some of the local tribes into providing food. It worked well enough to get them through the winter, but Smith made enemies of a lot of gentlemen.

1609

In June 1609, the Third Resupply, the fleet of ships led by the *Sea Venture*, left Plymouth. Among those it carried were just the sort of men John Smith had asked for.

Cut off from the rest of the fleet and beached on Bermuda, their brave new world, the castaways found not Hell, but Eden.

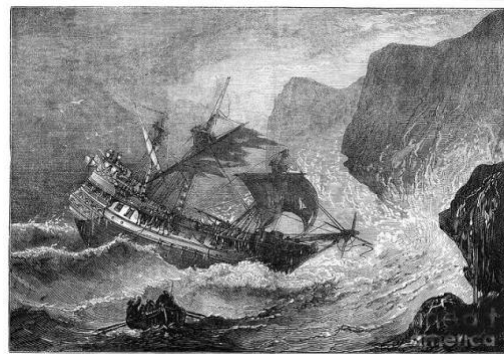
Uninhabited, rich with fish, fowl and fruit, the island even had pigs, courtesy of the Spanish, who had left them there after a

shipwreck. The isle was full of noises, including the screams of the Cahow bird.

Sir Thomas Gates, the governor, soon saw that if he didn't have a plan to get off the island, the settlers would never leave. Gates therefore rigidly ordered the company's days with the ringing of a bell. Everyone ate together, worked together, worshiped together. And they had a shipwright.

With the rigging and some wood salvaged from the wreck added to the Bermuda cedars that grew everywhere, two vessels began to emerge. There would be mutinies, but the survivors – all but 2, who would become the first Bermudans – would eventually sail to Virginia. One of the mutineers was Stephen Hopkins, whose name suggests the drunken Stephano in *The Tempest*.

Meanwhile, the remaining vessels of the fleet had limped into Jamestown in August, carrying 300 more people, but very little in the way of food. Bad news.



The Wreck of the “Sea Venture”

John Smith, wielding dictatorial powers, might have been able to get the plantation through the winter. But he was badly burned by an “accidental” explosion of gunpowder that same month. Shortly thereafter, he escaped assassination only because of the assassin's last-minute change of heart.

Smith read the tea leaves and sailed for

England in October, leaving behind 420 settlers. In March 1610, just 6 months later, only 60 would still be alive.

1610



The Relief of "The Starving Time"

The survivors would call this "The Starving Time." With Smith gone, the local tribes quit providing food – and killed anyone venturing out in search of it. The settlers ate horses, cats, dogs and rats. And they ate each other – cannibalism – though probably only the bodies of those already dead.

On May 24, 1610, the Bermudans arrived at Jamestown aboard the *Patience* and the *Deliverance*. They brought no extra food. Gates saw what needed to be done.

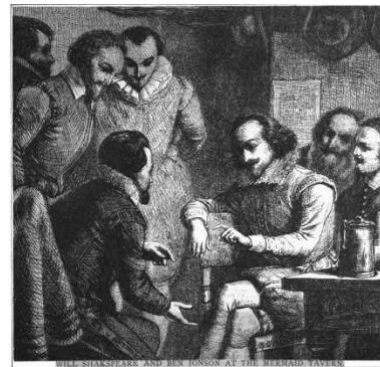
Two weeks later, the survivors abandoned the plantation and sailed down the James. The English had failed. All of America would now belong to Spain. Except that they ran into an advance party from Lord De La Warr's rescue fleet, carrying enough food to last a year. Had the fleet arrived only 2 tides later, it would have been too late.

1611

John Smith was the first to tell his tale in England, so the story of his rescue by Pocahontas has come down to us, even unto

the Disney version. John Rolfe, who actually married Pocahontas, would be the man who made Virginia prosper. From tobacco.

Besides being smokable, tobacco was the English wonder drug, offering cures for ringworm, scrofula and venereal disease, among others. But Virginia tobacco was terrible – and Spain held a monopoly on the rest of the New World's crop. Yet somehow, John Rolfe acquired excellent tobacco seeds. From where? Might he have brought them from Bermuda? Might the enormous later wealth of the plantation never have existed, had it not been for the shipwreck?



Ben & Will at the Mermaid Tavern

William Strachey returned to London with the true story of what had happened in Bermuda. The Virginia Company promptly banned its publication as bad for business. But the account circulated privately among Strachey's friends, who included (as you'll recall) Ben Jonson. Was it also read by Shakespeare? We don't know. We do know *The Tempest* is the only Shakespeare play to use the word "plantation."

The Tempest was first performed at the court of James I on November 1, 1611. And it will continue to be performed until the day when our revels are ended.

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for more than sixty years. During forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.