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Jamestown Journey: John Rolfe - I

Lead: Often overlooked in the stories of his exotic and more famous wife, Pocahontas, planter John Rolfe discovered the key to Jamestown's economic survival.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Born in Heacham, Norfolk, England about 1585, John Rolfe brought his family to Virginia in the 1609 re-supply fleet. They were shipwrecked on Bermuda and did not arrive on the Chesapeake until June 23, 1610.

Like most colonists in those early years he engaged in subsistence agriculture. They needed to stay alive. Yet, it was felt that if Virginia was to truly prosper it had to find a cash crop or some other means of generating net revenue for the colony. Some time around 1612, Rolfe isolated and began experimenting with *nicotiana tabacum*, a strain of tobacco imported from the Caribbean. The aromatic weed had been cultivated by the Powhatan Indians but the local variety was bitter, not like the West Indian tobacco that was all the rage in Europe.

Rolfe's experiments were

successful. In early summer 1613 he sent a small shipment of the sweet tobacco to England. It instantly caught on and eventually proved Virginia's salvation. In 1614 widower Rolfe was made secretary of the colony and in that same year he met and married Mataoka, the recently baptized daughter of Powhatan, the regional Indian Algonquian chieftain. The colonists knew her as Pocahontas though now she bore the Christian name Rebecca.

The marriage, though apparently provoking some disapproval in the colony, proved a diplomatic godsend. Relations between the settlers and Native Americans markedly improved for several years and the

Rolfes created something of a sensation when in 1616, with their infant son Thomas, they paid a promotional visit to the Mother Country. Next time: a growing prosperity.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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Townsend, Camilla. *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma.* New York: Hill and Wang, 2004.

<http://www.nps.gov/archive/colo/Jthanout/Rolfe.html>

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