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What Happened to the “Lost Colony” of Roanoke Island?

Over four-hundred years ago, one of the greatest, well-known mysteries in American history came to be — The Lost Colony of Roanoke Island. A new colony of over a hundred settlers led by Sir Walter Raleigh and Governor John White had set sail from England in hopes of forming a new life in the New World on Roanoke Island. The mysterious, disappearing colony made its debut on the coast of the Carolinas in August in the year of 1587. This land was not particularly all unfamiliar because this was not Raleigh’s first go-round with the New World. He attempted to lead the new colony in the same direction that he had led his previous, unsuccessful colony, not thinking anything of it. Some of the settlers believed that the particular spot that they had chosen to reside on did not display favorable conditions, so the idea of moving inland had been discussed. Even then, the colony chose to settle on the land they originally discovered. The colony was very crowded with settlers who were in need of more supplies, so their governor, John White, decided to set sail in return to England to gather more supplies. Before White left for England, he set firm instructions for the colony to leave some form of sign to showcase that they had moved inland if they decided to do so. Unfortunately, White was unable to return for three years because England was at war with Spain, leaving White without any form of finances to fund his trip back to Roanoke Island. White eventually made his way back to Roanoke Island, but once he arrived, “He found the settlement deserted, weeds and vines sprouting where houses had once stood” (Horn).

No one is quite sure as to what happened to the colony of Roanoke Island, but there are several theories. I will discuss the most prominent theories such as the theory of massacre, the theory of enslaving, and the theory of integration. I personally believe the settlers moved inland and integrated with the friendly, neighboring Indians of the Croatoan tribe, which then gave birth to the Lumbee tribe due to the fact that there is more evidence available to prove so.

Previous to the arrival of the new colony on Roanoke Island, there were settlers that had attempted to colonize Roanoke Island under the guidance of Ralph Lane who was appointed by Sir Walter Raleigh in April of 1585. According to the article “The Mystery of Roanoke Island,” “During the few first months of Lane’s administration, relations with the local Indians went well.” As time progressed, the colony did not succeed as a result of intense conflict with surrounding American Indian tribes due to agricultural issues. In the article “The Mystery of Roanoke Island” it says, “Though his first attempts failed, Raleigh was a determined man,” which then led to the creation of the new colony (“The Mystery of Roanoke Island”). It is believed that the new colony led by John White may have possibly encountered the same violent disputes as well. During the new settlers’ time, the East Coast was experiencing “the most extreme drought in 800 years” (“Vanished into Thin Air”). According to the theory of massacre, this led to the colony’s food, the surrounding Indians’ food, and other supplies to dwindle tremendously, leaving them in complete survival mode. This then caused an outbreak of violence, ending in a horrifying massacre of the settlers. Although this is a very strong theory, there was no evidence to prove that such an incident had occurred. Once John White had returned to Roanoke Island, their homes were certainly dismantled, but there was no trace of bodily remains to showcase that violence was involved. This causes me to believe that this theory is invalid until proper evidence is found.

Other theories say that the settlers were overtaken and enslaved by neighboring Indians. According to the article by the name of “A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Mystery,” “The only other people living in America at that time were scattered Indian tribes. Not all of them were friendly. They were frightened of the strange white people who arrived in ‘white-winged ships’” (Feetham and Rogers). Due to the fact that the neighboring Indians were not too fond of the English settling on their land, this could have led them into a fit of anger, but instead of killing them off, the Indians could have potentially used them as a resource of their own. The theory of enslaving is somewhat strong as well because “What little evidence remains suggests that they left in an orderly fashion” (Rowell). This could support the fact that there was no sign of distress or violence left behind by the colony. On the other hand, I think that the theory of enslavement is based more so on good judgment that it is possible that it could have happened. Other than the fact that this theory could show that there was no sign of harm done toward the settlers, I did not come across any evidence to further prove this theory, so I personally believe it is merely an idea with no hard facts to back up it up.

As White had instructed the colony before his departure, there was an inscribed message left on a post to give White an idea of where they had “vanished” to. The message read “CROATOAN,” leading White to believe that his colony had decided to move inland as they had previously discussed. Unfortunately, there was bad weather coming at the time, and White had no choice but to head back to England. He never knew what actually happened to his colony. As time passed on, many people were still stunned by the idea that the colony just disappeared without a trace. Considering that White never got a chance to continue his search, he could not prove that his colony did move inland with the Croatoans, a Native American group who lived in the coastal areas of what we know of now as North Carolina. This is what led to their name, The

Lost Colony, but “According to the Lumbee Indians of North Carolina, the Roanoke colonists were never lost at all” (Rowell). It is believed by some that the colony did decide to move inland and integrate within the Croatoan tribe because “Some fifty years later, blue-eyed descendants of the Croatan Cheraw were discovered speaking English, practicing Christianity, and bearing about 75% of the surnames of the Roanoke colonists” (Rowell). These descendants are now known as the Lumbee tribe. This theory is known as “the most compelling explanation, and one that is gradually gaining acceptance in the historical and anthropological communities” according to Ryan Whirty, who wrote the article “The Lost Colony of Roanoke.” This theory of integration with the Croatoans giving birth to the Lumbee tribe is the most logical theory to me because the colony seemed to have left a mark allowing White to know that they were alive and well. Although he did not get a chance to search for his colony, this does not eradicate the theory as a whole. The research about later descendants from the Croatoan tribe linking back to the settlers goes to show that it is highly likely that that is where they ended up and that they were safe after all. Adolph Dial, an advocate of the Lumbee theory, states that “the circumstantial evidence, when joined with logic, unquestionably supports the Lumbee tradition that there was a real and lasting connection with the Raleigh Settlement” (qtd. in Whirty).

In conclusion, no one will ever really know what happened to the English settlers on Roanoke Island. The co-founder of the First Colony Foundation, Phil Evans, states that “Everyone in the world has their own opinion about what happened to them” (qtd. in Whirty). As a result of being left absolutely helpless by John White for three years, I strongly believe the colony fled inland with the Croatoan tribe and intermarried with them, leaving us with the Lumbee tribe we know of today. The only thing we as people today have to rely on are the bits and pieces left behind by the Lost Colony of Roanoke Island. All in all, this occurrence happened

many, many years ago, and the only people that know what truly happened to them are those that it happened to.

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