

History

First 400 Years

Bermuda completes a yearlong bash celebrating its impromptu founding.

Suppose you were a restless subject of the new United Kingdom, looking for adventure at the dawn of the 17th century, when harrowing transatlantic travel meant weeks in leaky steerage, not merely a few hours in economy class.

Scotland and England had recently united, Anglicans and Puritans remained at odds, the colony of Virginia was newly founded — but dying out fast — and the first Bermudians would eventually save it for England.

In June 1609, the Virginia Co. launched its Third Supply Relief Fleet — nine vessels from Plymouth, England — carrying supplies, food and roughly 600 new settlers. In July, one ship went down taking all souls in a hellish tempest. By August, seven vessels made it to Virginia, but without much of their cargo.

The flagship *Sea Venture* — a newly constructed armed merchantman of 300 tons and 16 guns — remained missing and presumed sunk, along with its 140 men, 10 women, handful of children, one dog and much-needed stores of supplies for the sick and starving settlers of Jamestown, Va.

But they did not drown at sea. An addition to the assorted vagabonds, jailbirds, unruly youths and skilled artisans aboard the *Sea Venture* for its first and last voyage, were Adm. Sir George Somers, commander of the fleet; Sir Thomas

Gates, appointed governor of the Virginia colony; John Rolfe, a pioneer in the cultivation of tobacco; and William Strachey, who kept a journal of the voyage.

Strachey wrote, “Windes and Seas were as mad as fury and rage could make them. The Sea swelled above the Clouds and gave battell unto Heaven.”

Adm. Somers kept the helm throughout the storm. In monstrous waves, the ship foundered for nearly 36 agonizing hours. Waterlogged biscuits clogged the pumps as crewmembers frantically bailed and attempted to plug holes in the planks with food and anything else at hand. Toward the end, water in the hold had risen to nine feet. All aboard were exhausted and preparing to die. They broke out the liquor.

But just before the battered ship could sink came “the work of a merciful God,” wrote Strachey. On July 28, the *Sea Venture* crashed onto the rocks of Bermuda, a tiny speck of islands amid a vast blue ocean, unpopulated by anyone except some wild hogs left by early explorers.

HARDY PIONEERS

Who were these fearless — or foolish — pioneers who risked all, weeks from any land, centuries before GPS, to create the New World?

CAPT. JUAN DE BERMÚDEZ. A Spanish explorer, Bermúdez (?–1570) veered off course during an expedition in 1503 or 1505 and spotted the islands for the first time. Considering its treacherous reefs and the unnerving cries of its cahows — now Bermuda’s national bird — he named the archipelago the Isles of the Devils and kept on sailing.

Around 1515, Bermúdez returned to explore further, but found no gold and no reason to stay. Except for his name, he left only the hogs, which may have saved the *Sea Venture* castaways from starvation a century later. They were featured on Bermuda’s first “hog money,” the earliest colonial coinage in the English Americas.

ADM. SIR GEORGE SOMERS. Somers (1554–1610) was born in Dorset, England. He won fame in a 1595 expedition, then went on to command several English ships. He was knighted in 1603 by the new King James VI of Scotland and I of England, and he served in Parliament.

In 1606 he helped to form the Virginia Co. and in 1609 became admiral of its resupply fleet, intended to save the settlement at Jamestown, then the world's most ambitious colonial expedition. The enterprise was financed privately in London to earn a profit, establish Great Britain in the Americas, and relieve the overcrowding in English cities.

After landing unexpectedly on the Isles of the Devils, Sir George mapped the islands, recast as the Somers Isles. He supervised construction of the 30-ton *Patience*, made from indigenous cedar with rigging from the wrecked *Sea Venture*.

After 42 weeks in Bermuda, Sir George commanded her and another new ship, the *Deliverance*. In May 1610 they arrived in Virginia with 142 castaways. Two colourful characters from the *Sea Venture*, Robert Waters and Christopher Carter, stayed behind, thus dating Bermuda's continuous inhabitation to July 28, 1609.

Upon landing at Jamestown, Somers found only 60 of the 500 colonists still alive. The supplies he delivered saved their lives and that of the colony.

Sir George returned to Bermuda to collect more food, knowing the islands had plenty of hogs, fowl and fish. He arrived safely but became ill and died on November 9, 1610. A nephew took his body back to England, but his heart was buried here, according to his wishes.

Today, a statue of Somers by sculptor Desmond Fountain stands in St. George's. The Bermuda Historical Society Museum, on Queen Street in Hamilton, displays several artefacts from his life, including portraits, models of the ships, his Italian sea chest and lodestone, a reproduction of his original map, and early coins and

silver. Ask to see the letter from Gen. George Washington requesting Bermuda's help in the American Revolution.

GOV. SIR THOMAS GATES. Gates (1585–1621) took over as governor of Virginia after his unscheduled stop in Bermuda, where he supervised construction of the 80-ton *Deliverance*, also made from indigenous cedar with rigging from the *Sea Venture*.

As the appointed official for Jamestown, Gates claimed authority in Bermuda, while Somers felt that he retained authority until the settlers, including Gates, landed in Virginia. Sir Thomas left his name on Gate's Bay, where the *Sea Venture* landed.

In Jamestown, the new governor found only 60 settlers left to govern after the winter of 1609–10, which became known as the Starving Time. The condition of his settlement was so poor that it was nearly abandoned, but another fleet arrived just in time to give the colony a reprieve.

JOHN ROLFE. Rolfe (1585–1622) pioneered the cultivation of tobacco in North America. His daughter died while stranded in Bermuda, and his wife died shortly after reaching Jamestown.

The Virginia Co. had found neither precious metals nor other exploitable resources in the colony. The Native Americans grew and smoked tobacco, but it tasted bitter. So Rolfe experimented with seeds that offered a milder smoke, obtained from Trinidad and Venezuela even though Spain had declared the death penalty for anyone selling such seeds to a non-Spaniard.

He developed new methods of curing the leaf and enhancing its flavour. In 1614 his first shipments to London became the foundation of North American agriculture. Ironically, Rolfe is best remembered for his 1614 marriage to Chief Powhatan's daughter, Pocahontas, who toured England triumphantly as a visiting princess, and died there in 1617.

Rolfe's final years were busy as secretary of Virginia and a member of its council. He died suddenly in 1622, possibly in a massacre. He left a son by Pocahontas, a third wife, and a second daughter. No one knows what he looked like, since portraits were painted well after his death.

WILLIAM STRACHEY. Strachey (1572–1621) wrote most of what we know about the voyage of the *Sea Venture*, the founding of Bermuda and the salvation of Jamestown. Although suppressed by the Virginia Co., his accounts from Bermuda were believed to provide the basic plot of William Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* — reset in Italy — which debuted on November 1, 1611.

Born in Essex, England, he attended Cambridge University, married and settled in Surrey, lived on an inheritance, and befriended poets and playwrights. In precarious financial condition, he tried to mend his fortunes in the New World, purchasing shares in the Virginia Co. and sailing on the *Sea Venture*.

He chronicled the ocean crossing, as well as the accidental founding of Bermuda, which turned out to be paradise, except for three mutinies and a murder (Robert Waters had smashed Edward Samuels with a shovel in a brawl, later to be pardoned). He documented a marriage (Thomas Powell and Elizabeth Parsons), two births (a girl who died after three days and a boy who apparently survived) and three other deaths.

Strachey remained at Jamestown for less than a year, serving as secretary, then returning to England in 1611. He died in poverty.

THE NEXT 400 YEARS

Shipwreck survivors founded the town of St. George. By the end of the 17th century, English immigrants had established communities at Flatts, Crow Lane, Riddell's Bay and Mangrove Bay.

In 1612 democracy arrived with the first proper English settlers aboard the *Plough*. Richard Moore served as first governor, and in 1620 Bermuda convened its first legislative assembly, now the world's third-oldest parliament.

Families adopted maritime trades such as shipbuilding, eventually running speedy sloops for profitable sidelines as privateers. During the War of 1812, Bermudians seized almost 300 ships.

Bermuda made a great vantage from which to smuggle. In 1775, thieves in St. George's liberated more than 100 barrels of gunpowder sought by American revolutionaries. When the revolution ended in 1783, Great Britain lost all of its harbours between Canada and the West Indies, vesting Bermuda with new military importance. During the U.S. Civil War, Bermudian sloops evaded the Union blockade to sneak goods into the Confederacy. In exchange, they received gold and cotton, which they sold in London for 10 times the price.

Many foreign vessels have foundered on Bermuda's reefs, becoming targets for scavengers. Today Bermuda has more sunken vessels than almost anywhere — great for divers. In the early 20th century, with the advent of telecommunications and easier travel, Bermuda practically invented island tourism, still important to the economy.

During World War II, Bermuda became a hotbed of espionage. Teams of young women code breakers worked in the basement of the Hamilton Princess Hotel to decipher transmissions from nearby German ships and submarines. When planes carrying mail landed in Bermuda to refuel, agents rifled through their bags, looking for coded messages, whilst the pilots enjoyed their coffee breaks.

After the war, Bermuda went into business, luring British, American and Canadian firms with low tax rates and favourable policies. Today much of the insurance industry is based here.

400TH ANNIVERSARY

In 2009, Bermuda threw a yearlong bash to celebrate all that the oldest self-governing British colony had accomplished in four centuries.

On July 28, hundreds gathered at St. Catherine's Beach to watch "survivors" row ashore in 17th-century costume, recreating Bermuda's founding exactly 400 years later. The actor playing Sir Thomas Gates declared, "I claim these islands, in their entirety, to be English soil."

Queen Elizabeth II, a descendant of King James VI of Scotland and I of England, paid her respects in November 2009, 56 years after her first visit, saying, "In 1609, the storm-lashed crew and passengers from the shipwrecked *Sea Venture* could not possibly have imagined the future Bermuda.

"No one could have anticipated how Bermudians would repeatedly and successfully reinvent themselves over the following 400 years. In that time, Bermudians excelled, among other things, as tobacco farmers, traders in salt, privateers and builders of fast schooners.

"Tourism in this mild climate, so close to North America, remains a vital part of your economic life. More recently, Bermuda has been a successful pioneer of the highly-specialized reinsurance business."

At a December 2009 gala attended by the governor, premier, and other dignitaries, Bermuda 2009 Chair Conchita C. Ming proclaimed, "We are definitely the 'mouse that roared.'"

"There have been well over 150 events, exhibits and projects — the large events: Bermuda Festival, Tall Ships, Somers Day, Emancipation Day, the Tattoo and, of course, the visit from Her Majesty a week ago — to the smaller events: book displays, flowers adorning Kings Square and shipwrecked salvage specials."

The organising committee raised \$1.2 million from the private sector, including the Bank of Bermuda Foundation, ABIR and Butterfield Bank. The government matched that figure and provided additional direct support. Sponsorship in kind

came from Fairmont Hotels, Corporation of Hamilton, Appleby, Deloitte, Total Marketing Communication, Digicel, Key Tech, and Butterfield and Vallis.

Indeed those first haggard settlers could not have imagined the New World they were creating. Today we cannot imagine what the next 400 years will bring. But one thing is certain, Bermuda and her people will be at the centre of it.