

Religion at Jamestown

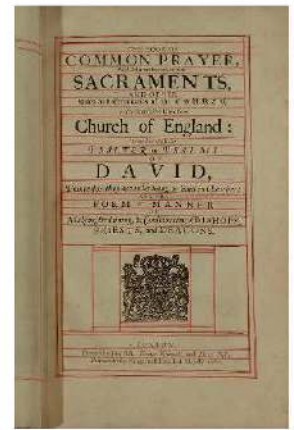
In 1534, King Henry VIII of England split from the Roman Catholic Church and created his own church hierarchy. Thus, Henry became the head of the church as well as the head of the government. After his death, Henry's daughter Mary attempted to return England to Catholicism. When Elizabeth I succeeded her, a system of religion, called the Church of England, was established that placed the church strictly under control of the monarch. Where Henry was referred to as the "Supreme Head of the Church", Elizabeth was called the "Supreme Governor".

The Church of England was neither strictly Roman Catholic nor Protestant, but had some of both in its theology. The church did not intend to vary from the Catholic faith and liturgy. However, the church rejected papal supremacy. The Prayer Book, instituted by King Edward through his regents in 1549, included a petition in the litany that the church be free from the "tyranny of the Bysshop of Rome and al hys detestable enormities." Two Acts of Parliament were issued in 1559. The Act of Supremacy declared that no foreign prince or potentate had any authority over the English realm. The Act of Uniformity required religious services to follow the Book of Common Prayer (prayer book). Elizabeth viewed the church as part of the government, so there was no separation of church and state in 17th century England.



Upon Elizabeth's death, James I inherited the throne partly because he did not profess the Catholic faith. King James, as the head of the Church of England, wanted to establish a foothold for Protestantism in the New World, for both spiritual and political reasons. The English strongly believed it was their duty to spread the gospel and convert the indigenous people they encountered to the Protestant Christianity. King James also recognized the importance of establishing English colonies as a counter to the energetic colonizing efforts of the Spanish, who were zealously converting native people in their colonies to Roman Catholicism. In the original charter granted by King James to the Virginia Company on April 10, 1606, the first motivation to colonize the New World mentioned is to spread the Christian religion. This statement was made by or on behalf of King James to the major investors in the Virginia Company:

Wee, greatly commending and graciously accepting of theire desires to the furtherance of soe noble a worke which may, by the providence of Almightye God, hereafter tende to the glorie of His Divine Maiestie in propogating of Christian religion to suche people as yet live in darkness and miserable ignorance of the true knowledge and worshippe of God and may in tyme bring the infidels and salvages living in those parts to humane civilitie and to a settled and quiet governemete . . .



The leaders of the Virginia Company were members of the Church of England and brought the established religion with them to Jamestown. Men leaving for Virginia had to take an oath acknowledging the supremacy of the King, and the lack of power or authority over him by the Pope, before they could set sail to Virginia. The Church of England religion was central to the lives of the Jamestown settlers. Near the end of the voyage on April 29, the colonists erected a cross and gave thanks to God on a point of land they named Cape Henry in honor of the eldest son of King James. Captain John Smith tells of the settlers landing at Jamestown in 1607 and erecting a crude temporary structure to use for church services. It was made from a sail stretched among the boughs of trees, sides of rails and benches made of unhewn tree trunks. The altar was made by nailing a log to two neighboring trees as a cross bar. Later that year, the settlers built the first real church building. John Smith describes it as a barn-like structure and gives very few details on its construction. The settlers worshipped in it until January 1608, when it was destroyed by fire. The church was then rebuilt, apparently similar in appearance to the first church. This second version was probably the church in which Ann Burras, one of the first two women at Jamestown, was married later in 1608 and where her newborn daughter, Virginia Laydon, was then baptized. This may also have been the church in which Pocahontas was baptized and was later married to John Rolfe. When Lord de la Warr arrived as governor in 1610, he found that the church had fallen into a sad state of disrepair and had it restored and improved.

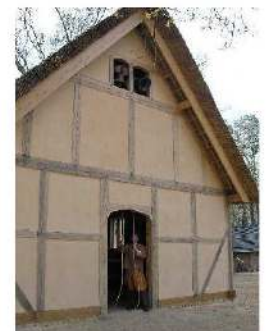


Martial law was established by Lord de la Warr in 1610 to enforce discipline among men who were in open conflict with the native population. Under the military rule imposed by de la Warr, church attendance was mandatory. Services were held fourteen times a week, with sermons preached twice on Sunday and once on either Wednesday or Thursday. Two prayer services, one in the morning and one in the evening, were held Monday through Saturday. These services followed the Book of Common Prayer. One of the Sunday services was followed by the reading of the laws, so that everyone was made aware of them. An afternoon catechism was also held by the minister on Sunday.

There was little opportunity for men working in the vicinity of James Fort to avoid the required church services. The Captain of the Watch was under instructions to round up all persons, except those sick or injured, and bring them to the Church at the appropriate times. The laws prescribed a range of punishments for those who failed to attend services, as well as for the minister if he failed to conduct a service. Missing one would cost the settler his ration of food for the day. Additional absences received increasingly severe punishments and could result in death. There are no historic records of enforced punishments given in relation to church attendance at Jamestown.



The Virginia colony was served by ministers appointed by the Bishop of London, under whose jurisdiction laid the parishes within the colony were laid out. Each minister was dispatched with a role as spiritual leader to the colonists and as Anglican missionaries of the Church of England toward the Indians. Their missionary work was largely unsuccessful, as they were preoccupied with the spiritual needs of the distressed colonists.



When Captain Samuel Argall came to Jamestown in 1617, he found the fort to be in a severe state of disrepair, with few houses, the church down, the palisades broken, contaminated water and tobacco planted in every possible place. That year, Captain Argall built a third church on the site where the present day church stands at Historic Jamestowne.

This structure was built of timbers and had a cobblestone foundation. This is the church that was the site of the first General Assembly meeting on July 30, 1619.

Sources:

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Historical background materials made possible by Archibald Andrews Marks.