

A History Mystery  
**What happened to  
the Lost Colony?**

---



Today, you will be historians.

You will try to solve one of the  
oldest and most famous  
mysteries in American history.

---



# Let's read about Roanoke: A History Mystery

## Resource 1: Roanoke: A History Mystery

One of the oldest mysteries in American history began over 400 years ago. Historians are still not sure what happened, but they have some theories. In England's attempt to establish its first settlement, colonists crossed the Atlantic Ocean and settled in Roanoke Island and disappeared. What happened to them? This is the unsolved mystery of the "Lost Colony."

In 1587, England sent a large group of its people to attempt to set up the first English colony in the wild and strange land of America.

England had tried to establish a colony in America two years before in 1585, but the colonists ran out of food and returned to England.

This second group of colonists landed on Roanoke Island in July 1587. Roanoke is on an island off the coast of North Carolina. The island has lots of thick wetlands, tall oak trees, and wildlife. When the colonists arrived on Roanoke, they found the broken-down fort that the first group of colonists left two years earlier. They decided to settle near that fort.



England's Roanoke colony was made up of about 120 people— mostly men but also 17 women and nine children. The governor was John White. Another important colonist in the group was Eleanor Dare. Eleanor had a baby shortly after arriving on Roanoke. Baby Virginia Dare became the first English person born in America.

John White went back to England in August 1587 for more supplies. His plan was to return to Roanoke right away. But Spain invaded England when he returned. England needed White's ship to help fight the Spanish.

John White was finally able to return to Roanoke three years later in 1590. When he got to Roanoke, he discovered that all of the colonists were gone! There were no signs of life anywhere.

The only clues left were the words "Croatoan" carved into a wooden post. He also found the letters "C-R-O" carved into a nearby tree. One thing John White knew - Native Americans lived on Croatoan Island just south of Roanoke.

John White planned on going to Croatoan Island to see if the colonists had moved there. But a great storm damaged some equipment on his ship, and he was forced to return to England.



England never sent anyone to search for the colonists. The colonists were never found.

England did not set up its first permanent colony in Jamestown until 1607.

Even today, historians have still not found evidence that the colonists were ever on Croatoan Island. The mystery continues. What happened to the colonists?

You will now have a chance to come up with your theory about what happened to "the Lost Colony."

**Now, go back to the reading and underline any clues that might help explain what happened to the “Lost Colony”**



**Share your evidence!**

# Analyzing Theories

Historians have come up with **SIX** theories that might explain what happened to the “Lost Colony”

## Theory 1

**Theory 1:** Native Americans killed the colonists on Roanoke Island.

When John White got back to Roanoke Island in 1590, he did not find any bones or bodies or any signs of fighting. Bones last a long time before they decay.

**Strong Theory or Weak Theory (circle one). Explain why.**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

**Who agreed?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Who disagreed?** \_\_\_\_\_

1. Read the theory on you own.
2. Decide if the theory is strong or weak and explain your reasons.
3. Share your conclusions with your group members. Do other group members agree with your conclusion?
4. List who agreed with your rating and who disagreed.

# Analyze the next five theories

## Theory 2

**Theory 2: The colonists were all killed on Roanoke Island by disease.**

When the English first came to Virginia they brought with them diseases, such as flu and smallpox, that were new to Native Americans. Native Americans had no immunity against these diseases, and many died very quickly. Letters written by the colonists tell us that the English remained healthy.

## Theory 3

**Theory 3: Their town was washed away by a hurricane and the people drowned.**

When John White got back to the Island, he found that the houses were gone, but a high fence, called a palisade, had been built around the town area and it was still there.

## Theory 4

**Theory 4: The colonists were taken hostage by the Spanish.**

The English settlers' boats were missing when John White returned in 1590 to Roanoke. Saint Augustine was a colony Spain had in the New World. This colony is located on the eastern coast of what is now known as the state of Florida. Spanish soldiers who were living there in 1588 heard reports that England had established a new colony in the New World. This new colony was Roanoke. The Spanish may have sent their ships up the coast to take the colonists hostage. Or, the Spanish may have caught the Roanoke colonists as they were on their ships, going to live somewhere else.

## Theory 5

**Theory 5: The colonists left Roanoke Island and went to live with the Native Americans**

The word 'Croatoan' carved on a fence post has interested historians for a long time. We know that Croatoan meant two things: the name of a group of friendly Indians, and the name of the island where they lived. When John White returned to find his colonists gone from Roanoke, he thought they might have gone to Croatoan because the word was carved on the fence post. John White was never able to go to Croatoan to find out and modern searchers have not yet found anything on Hatteras Island that shows that the colonists were there.

## Theory 6

**Theory 6: The colonists left Roanoke Island and went to live in some other place.**

John White's group was supposed to build their town near the Chesapeake Bay, not on Roanoke Island. It is possible that they left Roanoke and went to the Chesapeake Bay, using the wood from their houses to build a boat. That might explain why the people, their houses, and their equipment were all gone when White got back. Almost twenty years later a different group of English colonists did sail to the Chesapeake and started a settlement called Jamestown. One of its' leaders was Captain John Smith. The Native king of the area was Powhatan (ever hear of Pocahontas? Powhatan was her father). Powhatan told Captain Smith that English colonists had been in his land! He claimed that he had killed them all to discourage other English from coming to the New World and taking the Natives' land.

# Standing Survey

Stand under the theory you think is the best explanation for what happened to the Roanoke Colony.

Discuss with the other students who chose the same theory. Why is this the best explanation?

Defend this theory to the rest of the class.





# Creating and Analyzing a Timeline

Directions: Read over the reading "Roanoke: A History Mystery." Find the dates when each of the following events occurred. Then create a timeline in the box below that shows the correct order in which the events occurred. The first event has been written into the timeline so that you understand what you are supposed to do.

- \_\_\_\_\_ England first tried to set up a colony on Roanoke Island
- \_\_\_\_\_ John White returned to Roanoke and found no one.
- \_\_\_\_\_ John White returned to England to get more supplies
- \_\_\_\_\_ England set up its first permanent colony at Jamestown, Virginia.
- \_\_\_\_\_ England tried a second time to set up another colony on Roanoke Island
- \_\_\_\_\_ Spanish Armada (navy) invaded England.

Date	Event
1585	England first tried to establish a colony on Roanoke Island

**Analyze and Draw Conclusion:** Based on the information in the timeline, what might explain why England did not try to set up its colony in America until 1607?

---

---

---

## Completed Timeline

<b>1585</b>	England first tried to establish a colony on Roanoke Island
<b>1587</b> (July)	England tried a second time to set up another colony on Roanoke Island
<b>1587</b> (August)	John White returned to England to get more supplies
<b>1588</b>	Spanish Armada (navy) invaded England
<b>1590</b>	John White returns to England and finds no one
<b>1607</b>	England sets up its first permanent colony in Jamestown, Virginia