Mini-Q Sample Essay

Jamestown: Why Did So Many Colonists Die?

It was not an easy beginning. English settlers began arriving on the James River in the Chesapeake Bay region of Virginia in the spring of 1607. Some hoped to make new homes. Many hoped to get rich. But for most the adventure would come to a sad end. By 1611, 400 of the first 500 colonists were dead. The question is why did so many colonists die. The answer can be found in three big problems: lack of water, lack of good workers, and poor relations with the Powhatan Indians.

Water was a problem in several ways. First, the drinking water was brackish which means it was too salty. People got sick when they drank it. (Doc A) Second, the river water was often dirty. This was because the tides from Chesapeake Bay backed up the water on the James River. Garbage that was dumped in the river floated back up to the settlement. Historians think many died from disease carried by the filthy water. (Doc A) A third water problem was drought. Tree-ring evidence shows that Jamestown received below normal rainfall between 1607 and 1611. (Doc B) The lack of rain meant that the corn crop would shrivel and die causing starvation. Water was a big problem in early Jamestown.

A second cause of death in the colony was too many unskilled workers. The first two ships' lists from 1607 and 1608 include 75 gentlemen, four carpenters and no farmers. (Doc C) Gentlemen were settlers who had little experience in doing hard work. What the colony needed so badly were people who could produce food and keep everyone alive. It was also a mistake to have as many goldsmiths as they did carpenters. (Doc C) We can't know for sure but it looks like the skills the settlers had were the wrong skills and this led to many deaths.

A third cause of death was bad relations with the local Powhatan Indians. One example of poor treatment by the settlers was when in 1609 a colonist named Francis West led 36 colonists to trade with the Indians. When things didn't go so well they wounded or killed two Indians. (Doc D) This must have made the Indians angry. Between August and the end of 1609, the Powhatans killed more than 200 colonists, some with weapons, and some by a siege of the fort at Jamestown where they didn't let any food get in. (Doc E) If other colonists behaved liked West's men, the colonists brought on the trouble with the Indians themselves. Good relations make good neighbors. Bad relations bring death.

Colonists died at Jamestown for many reasons. One man was even executed for mutiny. (Doc E) But the big three reasons were problems with water, lack of skills, and bad relations with the Powhatan Indians. Making a new settlement in America was not easy to do. The Jamestown colonists made it even more difficult with some bad decisions and some bad behavior.

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