The Settlement of English Colonies

At the outset new settlers to North America faced stark odds of survival. They arrived, in many cases, weakened by illness or sheer fatigue after their long sea journey. The supplies they brought were barely enough to last through their first months ashore. Their hopes for profitable trade would take years to realize. And their unfamiliarity with the New World environment placed them at an immediate, across-the-boards, disadvantage.

1. Why was survival in the new world such a challenge for new settlers? Cite three examples.

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Indeed, nearly everything they encountered seemed strange and puzzling. Most of them had no prior experience of a wooded landscape. The forests of their homeland had largely disappeared many years before—hence the American "wilderness" was bound to strike them as darkly menacing. Nor were they much familiar with human difference (people of different race, different culture, different language); in this regard, too, they would undergo a severe jolt upon encountering the native population.

2. Why was the new world "strange and puzzling" for the colonists?

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In short, they had to endure psychological stress as well as physical privation. Some gave up: retreated into private despair, failed to look after themselves, and died, as one report put it, "of melancholy." But most managed to cope, by adjusting their lives as best they could—and simply hanging on. Fortunately, the "starving times" they knew in the immediate aftermath of arrival did not, by and large, recur; within a few years, and given occasional (and invaluable) assistance by Indian neighbors, they were able to sustain themselves.

3. How did the colonists react to the psychological stress of the life in the new world?

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The colonist sought to overcome the unnerving strangeness of the land by remaking it in the image of home; at every point they sought to replicate English ways. The very names they gave their surroundings expressed this impulse, and many others, all transferred from places they remembered and cherished in the mother country. All this was part of convincing themselves that they had not lost their essential, long-treasured identity as English. It was, in effect, a strategy of denial; and, for the most part, it worked.

4. How did they overcome the strangeness of the land? Why was the "strategy of denial" effective?

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At the core of colonization, throughout the seventeenth century and on into the eighteenth, lay a development problem or, in their own words, the problem of transforming a "wild" countryside into a "pleasant garden." Land and other resources were present in great abundance. The challenge was to convert these into suitably finished "goods," whether for immediate consumption or for sale in domestic and foreign markets. The sheer scale of it was enormous. Forests must be cleared, soil prepared for cultivation, housing constructed (along with barns and other outbuildings), roadways, fences and walls lined out, boats and wagons prepared for use in transport, tools and furnishings fashioned from whatever lay at hand.

5. What problem did the colonists try to overcome? Identify their challenge.

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6. Why was the task so enormous for early settlers?