

4. The Religious Settlements of the Colonists

At this point we stop to look at the religious life and forms in the colonies. Virtually every colonizing effort had a form of religious entreaty at its base (we are not commenting on the depth or effectiveness thereof). Students interested in the documentation of this will find much data in Gausted: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY OF RELIGION IN AMERICA.

a. The Virginia settlement...in brief, as is the case.

- (1) Following the charter of the London Company, the Virginia colony was established at Jamestown (about 40 miles up the James River) in 1607. Herkluyt, the geographer and missionary was named rector of the community and James Hunt was the chaplain.
- (2) A new charter came in 1609 and Lord de la Ware was the presiding governmental official until 1618. I cannot speak of all the difficulties the company endured but it did grow although it did not fulfill its religious aspirations. It is interesting that when John Rolfe married Pocohantas he noted one of his reasons for so doing was her conversion (he wanted to convert her) to the Christian faith.
- (3) By 1622, as the colony grew, the lack of suitable clergy became a problem and with the end of the Virginia company in 1624 this problem greatly increased. What established clergyman would leave the settled condition of England for the insecurity of the colonies?
- (4) Between 1648 and 1660 Virginia did not fare well politically due to the Commonwealth period. But with the return of the monarch in 1660 her preferred status was renewed and by 1671 there were 48 established parishes. The chief problems confronting the church in Virginia were 1) the size of the parishes as they covered vast land areas, 2) the doubtful nature of many of the clergy then serving, and 3) the inadequacy of educational opportunity for ministerial training, etc.
- (5) So in 1685, in answer to many queries, the Bishop of London appointed a "commissary", a church figure to report directly to him, who would take charge of improving the ecclesiastical life of the colony. This was James Blair who in 1693 founded William and Mary college and where he presided for the next forty or so years.
- (6) The succeeding commissary was Thomas Bray, appointed in 1695. He did not come to Virginia until about 1700 but in the meantime formed the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) in 1698 and the Society for Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) in 1701. The former concentrated on getting Christian literature to the colonies and the latter on evangelism.
- (7) Spiritual fervor did not run high, however, and it is estimated that in 1700 only one in twenty persons was a church member.