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New Evidence Provides Missing Clue to the Arrival of the First Africans in Virginia, 1619

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New evidence has provided the final missing clue about the arrival of the first Africans in Virginia in 1619. Recent research in the National Archives in England by Dr. James Horn, president and historian at Jamestown Rediscovery, has revealed important information that sheds fresh light on the number of Africans who arrived in Virginia in the summer of 1619 aboard two privateers (pirate ships), the *White Lion* and the *Treasurer*. “We now have clear documentary proof,” Horn said, “that several of the Africans on board the *Treasurer* were put ashore in Virginia in addition to those who were sold by the captain of the *White Lion*.”

The arrival of “20 and odd” Africans at Point Comfort (Hampton) towards the end of August, 1619, is well known to historians. John Rolfe (formerly the husband of Pocahontas) reported the Africans were “bought” by several prominent planters and merchants in return for provisions, which the crew of the *White Lion* desperately needed. But Rolfe gave few details about the arrival of the *Treasurer* at Point Comfort a few days later, writing only that she put to sea again soon after and headed for the English colony of Bermuda.

The new evidence comes from a court case that was held before the High Court of Admiralty (HCA), the original records of which are preserved in the UK’s National Archives near London. John Wood, a crewman on board the *Treasurer* told the court that in the summer of 1619 his ship sailed to the West Indies in search of supplies where she met the *White Lion*. He claimed the *White Lion* had “taken an Angola ship” (a Spanish or Portuguese slave ship carrying enslaved Africans). Wood said, without explaining why, that the company of the *White Lion* gave the *Treasurer* 28 or 30 of the Africans she had plundered. The *Treasurer* then made her way northwards to Virginia where she left “two or three of negroes” before setting course for Bermuda.

“The evidence clarifies a complicated story,” Horn says. “Much of Wood’s testimony in court was deliberately misleading, part of a scheme to cover up an unsanctioned raid on Spanish shipping in the West Indies. Nevertheless, Wood’s version of events offers vital clues about what actually happened to some of the first Africans.” He states that “two or three” Africans were “left at Virginia,” which is the only evidence that has surfaced to date indicating that Africans were left in the colony and their number.

The brevity of John Rolfe's report about the *Treasurer's* movements had led most historians to doubt whether any Africans disembarked at Point Comfort. The new information, however, suggests otherwise.

A full reconstruction of events surrounding the arrival of the first Africans is now possible. Two privateers, the *White Lion* and the *Treasurer*, were sent by the influential nobleman, the earl of Warwick, to prey on Spanish ships in the Caribbean. There in late July or early August 1619, they engaged in a furious sea battle with a large Spanish ship, the *St. John the Baptist*, which had set out from Luanda in Portuguese Angola with 350 enslaved Angolans in her hold bound for Veracruz, New Spain. Overwhelming the slave ship in the Gulf of Mexico, the privateers robbed the ship of 60 Africans and sailed to Virginia.

The *White Lion* reached Point Comfort first and likely sailed on to Jamestown. Point Comfort was a small maritime community at the mouth of the James River where ocean-going ships typically took on board a pilot to navigate the river. Going up to Jamestown would explain how the majority of the Africans came into the possession of two of the most powerful men in the colony, the governor Sir George Yeardley and the head merchant Abraham Piersey. On the busy wharves at Jamestown the "20 and odd" Africans, which in fact numbered 29, were sold to wealthy planters and taken away to their plantations along the river.

Three to four days later the *Treasurer* moored off Point Comfort. Despite a message sent to the captain, Daniel Elfrith, from Governor Yeardley inviting him to Jamestown, Elfrith quickly departed. He left two or three Africans behind, which he gave or sold to the three men sent by the governor to Point Comfort to make contact with Elfrith. The three men were John Rolfe, Lieutenant William Pierce, and Captain William Ewen or Evans. One of the Africans, a woman named "Angelo" (Angela), was identified in a census of 1625 as arriving on the *Treasurer* and living in the household of Pierce in Jamestown.

Archaeological excavations by Jamestown Rediscovery in collaboration with the National Park Service are currently being undertaken at Pierce's household lot. It is the only accessible site in the US that can be directly associated with one of the first Africans. A new field season has recently begun and visitors will be able to meet archaeologists on site through early November, weather permitting. In commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first Africans, special programs featuring living history performances of Angela will be presented from March to August. In addition, a First Africans tour that describes the arrival of the Africans and subsequent history of African Americans on Jamestown Island is presented regularly every week (see our scheduled program online for details: www.historicjamestowne.org/visit/).

Historic Jamestowne is jointly administered by the National Park Service and Jamestown Rediscovery and preserves the original site of the first permanent English settlement in the New World. Entrance to the site is open from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. The Historic Jamestowne Visitor Center is open from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., and the grounds remain open until dusk. General admission is \$20.00 per adult (which includes both Historic Jamestowne and Yorktown Battlefield for seven consecutive days). Children 15 & under are free. National Park Passes and Preservation Virginia Memberships are accepted; however a \$5 per person fee may apply. For further information, visit www.historicjamestowne.org or call (757) 856-1250.