

SEA VENTURE:

THE SHIP THAT SAVED AMERICA?

A LITTLE SHIP CALLED the *Sea Venture*, although wrecked on the way to America, played a key role in saving the Jamestown colony from extinction and laying a claim for England to the isles of Bermuda. But first she and the other tiny boats with which she sailed had to survive what some scholars surmise was a category five hurricane.

BY JOHN TIFFANY

They say America, in the sense of the United States, was planned some 400 years ago by Sir Francis Bacon. He surely had information from the European Templars, who evidently had been in America going back to the 14th century or earlier, and possibly, indirectly, from others such as the Phoenicians, who were here around 450 B.C.

The book *Sea Venture* by Kieran Doherty¹ gives one practically a blow-by-blow account of what appears to have really happened to one key ship in particular that made it to Jamestown, and its effect upon U.S. history.

In the old days, the Atlantic Ocean was not the “pond” it seems today, but a terrifying obstacle, filled with horrible storms; sea monsters were sometime sighted as well. It was not easy, Englishmen and other Europeans found, to launch a colony in the mysterious lands on the far side of the ocean. North and South America are peppered with sites of failed colonies.

The Spaniards’ San Miguel de Gualdape, the English Roanoke (famed as “the lost colony”), the French Ajacan,



Above, a painting of the Jamestown colony shows the settlement as it may have looked in 1619. Left, Sir Francis Bacon, who surely knew that a large, lush land mass with navigable waterways existed across the Atlantic Ocean.



Fort Caroline, Sable Island, Charlesfort, Pensacola, Charlesbourg-Royal—all were failed, short-lived colonies attempted in the 1500s, north of the Caribbean. A hurricane wiped out the first Pensacola settlement. Frigid winters and malnutrition claimed several settlements; while starving settlers abandoned others. Indians sometimes laid siege to settlements or attacked them, or picked off white stragglers. Rival European powers also destroyed colonies.



Left, the British ship *Sea Venture* in rough waters, by Christopher Grimes. Few people today know of the odyssey of this ship and crew and its effect upon the settling of the Americas. Not only did the captain of the *Sea Venture* “discover” Bermuda, he was instrumental in saving Jamestown (shown below left).



called most of what is today the mid-Atlantic U.S., was chockfull of gold nuggets and silver just waiting to be picked up and sent back to England. This was how they expected to make a profit, with help from the friendly natives, so they did send over some mining and ore processing gear—but there was no gold found.

Not much later, when Bermuda was explored, they had the equally wrong idea that the waters around the uninhabited islands would be loaded with valuable pearly oysters. Wrong again. (Some British sailors did find, however, a large lump of ambergris on one of the beaches, weighing about 180 pounds.)

Many non-Virginians think America got started at Plymouth Rock, but Jamestown was settled 13 years earlier. (There were also a number of even earlier, but failed, colonies, such as the one at Roanoke, founded in the 1580s; see related story in this issue.)

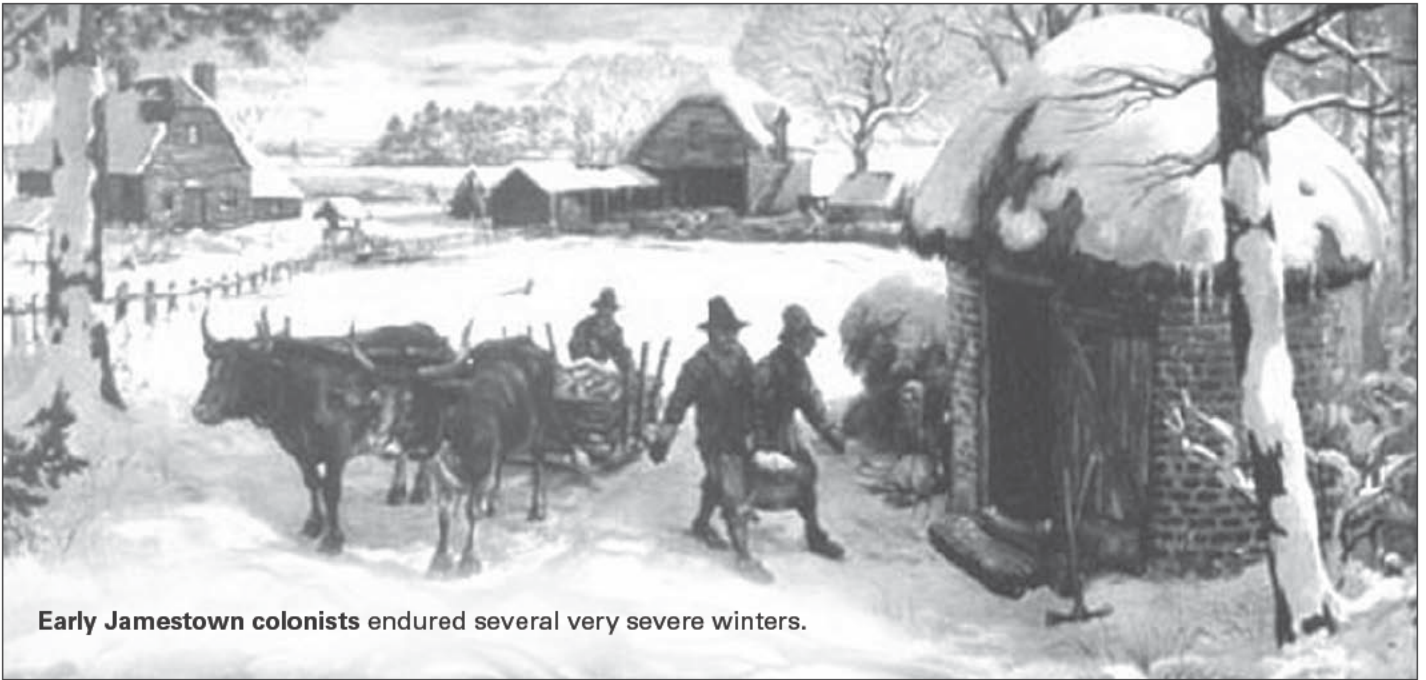
Traveling aboard the *Susan Constant* (rated at 120 tons), *Godspeed* and *Discovery* (or *Discoverie*), men sailed in late 1606 (Dec. 30) and landed May 13, 1607 at a place they named Jamestown, in honor of their king, up a river (the James River, naturally) from Chesapeake Bay.

Since the settlers were not trained as pioneers, it was almost vital to send over more food and supplies about once a year, if not more often, to prevent starvation while they struggled to establish themselves in the new country.

In the case of Virginia, this was partly due to the incredible stupidity of the Virginia Company, based in London, which was responsible for launching settlement efforts in eastern North America. They sent across the Atlantic an odd assortment of paupers and debtors, criminals, artisans and aristocrats—lazy “gentlemen” who thought themselves too good to work, rather than sturdy farmers, fishermen and hunters. The British investors had a wrongheaded idea that “Virginia,” as they

“Many non-Virginians think America got started at Plymouth Rock, but Jamestown was settled 13 years earlier than its Massachusetts counterpart.”

The length of the *Susan Constant*, largest ship of the fleet, is estimated at 116 feet. She is believed to have carried about 71 settlers, with Capt. Christopher Newport at the helm. The brigantine *Godspeed*, only 40 tons, but 68 feet long, carried 39 passengers and 13 sailors. The “flyboat” *Discovery*, a mere 20 tons, was just 38 feet long and seems to have carried about 34 passengers. About 144 settlers went ashore.



Early Jamestown colonists endured several very severe winters.

Within a year or so after it was established, Polish and Dutch immigrants were settling in Jamestown and in many ways helped facilitate the colony's survival.

EARLIER SETTLEMENTS

As things turned out, Jamestown was England's first permanent colony in the Americas, although an argument can be made for Newfoundland's settlement at St. Johns (visited by John Rut in 1527). But St. Johns did not have year-round settlement until about 1620.

It is worth noting that John Cabot (Zuan Chabotto) almost certainly came to America in 1497 from Merrie Old England, exploring under a commission from King Henry VIII, landing in eastern Newfoundland. He sailed on the *Matthew*, a doughty little ship of 50 tons, with 20 people aboard.

He reported back to his sponsors in Bristol, England that a large landmass, possibly a new continent, seemed to be present. Codfish were found in incredible abundance, seemingly an infinite resource. (Five centuries later they were all gone, due to overfishing. Despite a ban on fishing, the fish have failed to return after several years.)

The American settlement effort at that time by England was thrown off the track by the second Cornish Up-rising, and Cabot disappeared about 1499.

Recently evidence has surfaced of even earlier English voyages to the Americas. Historical detectives found a

record of a bank loan to finance Cabot's trip. The interesting thing is that this bank record refers to the voyage as an expedition to "the new land"—hinting that unnamed sailors had already discovered America, and that Cabot was not setting out into the unknown, or heading for the shores of China, which, it was supposedly believed, were directly west of England. The loan was for 50 nobles, equal to about 16 British pounds at the time, from the Bardi banking house of Italy.

Bristol merchants and/or Basque fishermen, it is

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thought, had discovered America before Cabot or Columbus, although they may not have realized it was actually a vast continent, or pair of continents. For whatever reason, they kept the discovery secret.

GILBERT SAILS TO NEWFOUNDLAND

In 1578 and 1583, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, a brilliant navigator and explorer, led fleets toward Newfoundland—seven ships the first time and three the second time, actually reaching Newfoundland in the second voyage, in an ill-fated attempt to build a settlement. But the harsh,

cold weather convinced them to turn tail and head for home. During the voyage back to Plymouth, the ships ran into a ferocious gale, and Gilbert and his vessel, the *Squirrel*, a ship of 8-10 tons, went down with all hands. The only ship of the three-ship fleet to make it back to England was the famous *Golden Hind* (formerly the *Pelican*), a 300-ton vessel.

His half brother, Sir Walter Raleigh, then picked up the torch and ran with it, launching the colony at Roanoke. (See the related story on page 12.)

GOOD ANCHORAGE

Jamestown offered good anchorage and an excellent harbor, but was swampy and filled with disease-carrying mosquitoes. Also the water was alternately brackish, depending on the tides, or filthy with sediment. Basically the Indians did not want it for these reasons, and so it was available to the Englishmen. The Indians (who were expected to welcome the palefaces with open arms) turned out to be hostile, perhaps as a result of earlier encounters with the Spanish and the French, and maybe the early Roanoke colonists. Soon, atrocities by the English would turn them even more hostile.

The Englishmen built forts and hid in them most of the time, afraid to set foot outside for fear of being filled with arrows. This made it very hard to plant crops or hunt for gold. Unless peace and trade could be established with the “naturals,” as they called them, the Englishmen were doomed to failure and starvation.

The Peace of Pocahontas would eventually give the white men what they needed, but this did not begin until 1614. (It would last until 1622; the local Indians would finally give up the struggle in 1645.)

The first seven years in Jamestown were beyond rough. The Virginia Company of London, having established the settlement of Jamestown in 1607, delivered more settlers and supplies, twice, in 1608, in the “First” and “Second” Supply Missions. Despite many deaths, this raised the population to about 200.

Other settlement efforts, which failed, may be noted: the 1607 Popham colony in what is now Maine, was short lived but notable because it was there that the first known ship to be built in America was constructed—and sailed to England.

Popham was founded a few months after the Jamestown colony—at today’s Phippsburg.

Five years earlier, in 1602, here was yet another failed



The Tempest & the Ambergris

This statue of Sir George Somers, sculpted by Desmond Fountain in 1984, commemorates the 375-year anniversary of the settling of the islands of Bermuda. Somers led the initial, accidental, hurricane-driven settlers of the islands, which had been thought to be uninhabitable but turned out to be a subtropical paradise. While on Bermuda, a few of the men left behind after Somers resumed his journey to Virginia found a large lump of ambergris, weighing some 180 pounds, worth now about \$57,000—a veritable fortune back then. The three men concealed the treasure, but Gov. Richard Moore, arriving in 1612 aboard a ship called the *Plough*, found out about it and confiscated the ambergris in the name of the Virginia Company. He then divided it into several smaller parts, sending only a portion at a time of the precious substance back to England, while holding on to the rest to give him leverage with the London home office. The islands were well suited to tobacco agriculture, cedar harvesting and salt production. There were plenty of feral pigs to eat, and birds so unafraid of humans they were easily killed for meat.

colony, this one at Cuttyhunk, in what is now Massachusetts. The Wampanoag tribesmen called the island Pooquoitkunnah.

On March 6, Bartholomew Gosnold set out aboard the barque *Concord* from England to plant a colony in America. The *Concord* was said to be in poor condition and dangerously small for such a voyage. But they made it. He and his men built a fort on Cuttyhunk, as he renamed the island, where he hoped to harvest sassafras for sale in Europe, where it was quite valuable.

But after less than a month, the men and *Concord* returned to England, and nothing much happened in the island until 1688, when it got its first permanent English settlers, who proceeded to cut down all the trees, leaving the isle bare and windswept.

The Popham colony was abandoned after one year, although the loss of life there was far less than at Jamestown. It is said the first ship built by the English in the New World was at Popham, where the small pinnace *Virginia of Sagadahoc* was constructed, and sailed to England.

She was laid down during the winter of 1609 (January-February-March?) and launched in spring 1609. Her ultimate fate is unknown—possibly wrecked in 1610. The length was less than 50 feet, displacement 30 tons, beam 14.5 feet.

George Popham, leaving England on May 31, 1607, aboard the *Gift of God*, accompanied by the *Mary and John*, with 120 colonists, arrived in America August 13, 1607 and August 16 respectively. The expedition hoped to find gold, to fish and harvest beavers for fur to sell, and to prove American forests could be used to build ocean-going ships. Each of the colonists except for Sir George himself, ironically, made it through the winter, although on December 1, 1607, about half the men returned to England aboard the *Gift of God*—a 53-day journey.

The idea was to stretch the food supply in America and to avoid angering the Abenaki neighbors, with whom trade was desired. They did manage to get together a cargo of beaver furs and sarsaparilla but decided the climate was too cold to tolerate, and there was not enough food, so they abandoned the colony.

It is interesting to note that the *Virginia of Sagadahoc* went on to sail back to America as part of the Jamestown Third Resupply Fleet, along with the *Sea Venture* and

other ships built in England. However, she was lost in 1610, probably a shipwreck.

It has been estimated there are an incredible 3 million wrecks at the bottom of the sea.

HARD TO FIND TRUTH

A true depiction of the Jamestown adventure is hard to find, but is provided by Kieran Doherty in his book.

Earlier, Sir Walter Raleigh, April, A.D. 1585, set up a colony of some 100 persons, mostly men, on the eastern side of Roanoke Island, in Pamlico Sound, in what is now North Carolina. (At that time all of eastern North America was called Virginia, and even Bermuda was thrown in for good measure.)

Short on supplies, with sickness and fear of the unknown, in 1586 they returned home. Next year, Raleigh tried again. John White left the colony in 1587 to return to

England for more supplies, intending to return in three months. But war with Spain intervened, and all his ships were confiscated to aid in the war effort. He was unable to return to “Virginia” until 1590, only to find the colony had disappeared (see related story). Raleigh himself did not participate in the traveling; he preferred to remain in England and handle that end of things. (He did travel to South

America once or twice, however.) Before the colony vanished, some of the colonists explored the coastline, going as far as today’s Florida.

A favorite of Queen Elizabeth, who liked to pose as “the virgin queen,” Raleigh named “Virginia” in her honor.

As we are frequently told, the Roanoke colony disappeared, leaving little other than the word “Croatoan” carved into a tree or palisade. The “lost colony” had pulled up its houses and gone off somewhere—possibly to Hatteras Island—including little Virginia Dare, the first known child born in America to English parents (and grand daughter of John White). They may have assimilated with the Indians, becoming the Lumbee tribe of today.

The English were sure they would find gold in the New World; in any case it made good propaganda to recruit settlers. In face, whenever a disaster befell the settlers, news of it was carefully suppressed back in Old Blighty. Only rosy reports were wanted.

In 1606 a fleet assembled by the Virginia Company set

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This painting by historical artist Keith Rocco—one of a series he has done on Jamestown—shows what the settlement might have looked like by the mid-17th century. It is a far cry from the town as it appeared shortly after settlement leader Capt. John Smith returned to England in 1609. That winter is still known as “the Starving Time.” During that winter 154 of the original 214 Jamestown settlers died. Survivors ate leather, and there was a report that one husband ate his wife.

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sail, with about 100 male settlers aboard. By 1607 they had established the settlement of Jamestown in Virginia on a bit of land the Indians chose not to live on. Supplies, and additional settlers, came in 1608.

The land at Jamestown was hot, humid, infested with disease-carrying mosquitoes, and the settlers were mostly aristocrats and artisans, who didn’t know how to farm, fish or hunt food animals, or to gather nuts and berries. They spent most of their time goofing off or looking for gold, which was not around there.

Doherty says the tents sent over as temporary shelters in the first landing were already rotten, after having been used two decades earlier by English soldiers fighting the Spaniards in the Netherlands. They were in tatters before even being erected in Virginia. Settlers were supplied with equipment to refine gold and silver but no farming tools.

It is quite amazing how inept the whole settlement effort was. You would think that if they learned nothing

from the Templars, who had been as far west as Minnesota, centuries earlier (see TBR January/February 2010), that they would have learned something from the English “plantations” that had been planted in Ireland not long before Jamestown.

THE ADVENTURE OF THE *SEA VENTURE*

On June 2, 1609, the *Sea Venture*, flagship of the “Third Supply” (six ships and two pinnaces), departed London.

The *Sea Venture* was a 300-ton armed merchant ship of the “carrack” style, three masted and about 100 feet long from bowsprit to sternpost. It is thought she was built in East Anglia, maybe six years earlier, but really her provenance is unknown. A short, chubby hull and a high profile, gave her a tendency to wallow in high seas. Nor was she well able to sail into the wind. She sailed as part

of a flotilla of eight or nine vessels, commanded by a privateer and adventurer named Adm. Sir George Somers (1554-1610), of Dorset. The intended destination was Jamestown, Virginia, to relieve what were thought to be some 600 settlers living there at the time.²

The fleet included the *Diamond*, *Falcon*, *Blessing*, *Unity*, *Swallow*, *Lion* and *Virginia*. The *Diamond* was probably just a little smaller than the *Venture*. The *Falcon* was third largest.

Doherty says the *Venture* carried 16 cannons and at least one swivel gun, although the dust jacket of his book, strangely, shows 11 cannons on one side of the ship, so that it would have 22 cannons. The jacket painting is courtesy of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in the United Kingdom. Be that as it may, the ship may have been overgunned and consequently top heavy. Most of the guns would eventually be pushed overboard when the ship was taking on water.

One of the passengers was John Rolfe, a gentleman farmer who wanted to introduce the West Indian species of tobacco to the Virginia mainland, where the Indians were cultivating an inferior species. As it turned out, this was one of the factors that saved Virginia from failure. Rolfe would, however, eventually be killed by the Indians.

Hemp was planted, but for rope making, not for smoking. Interestingly, King James hated tobacco smoking, and wrote a pamphlet violently denouncing the habit. For some reason this was “anonymous.”

Doherty includes plenty of colorful details and speculation as to what the various individuals of this saga were thinking.

On July 23, a terrible storm, apparently a hurricane, separated the *Venture* from the other vessels. It was a terrifying ordeal, especially for the already seasick passengers. In those days a navigator had no way of knowing if he were about to sail into a tempest. By the time the storm subsided, they had no idea where on the ocean they might be.

Sir Francis Bacon later wrote a play called *The Tempest*, his last play using the name of William Shakespeare, based on these events.

After four days, the *Venture* began taking on water. Land was sighted, with cedar and palm trees, and she totally wrecked, but remained upright, between two reefs

off the northeastern shore of Bermuda, on July 28, 1609. Reefs surround Bermuda like a ship-killing necklace.

Miraculously, all of the approximately 150 passengers, including women and children, and the ship’s dog, made it to the then-almost unknown land. They had heard of this island chain, but had heard it was filled with devils.

Bermuda, or the Bermudas (it is actually a number of islands closely packed), was discovered by Spanish navigator Juan de Bermúdez in 1505, who put a dozen pigs ashore, thinking to provide meat for any future mariners who might be castaway there. In 1511, Bermuda was named in his honor. Bermúdez was born in Palos, c. 1449 and died in 1570. In 1515 he gave testimony in hearings between the Spanish crown and the family of Christopher Columbus. His ship was *La Garza*, part of a Spanish fleet.

Diego Ramirez, Spanish captain of a galleon whose name is unknown, in 1603 spent three weeks on the islands, then filed a map and description of Bermuda with his principals in Spain.

Bermuda turned out to be uninhabited (no devils and no humans), but with plenty of wild birds so unused to humans that they were easily killed. Along with turtles and pigs, there was no shortage of food here.

Possibly the most amazing thing is that the Englishmen did not give up their bid to settle the man-killing American mainland and concentrate

all their efforts in Eden-like Bermuda.

Yet not all was perfect in Bermuda: Several mutinies took place. Six men decided to rebel and stay in the islands; but the situation was patched up (Doherty, p. 80). Then there was another mutiny. This time, ringleader Stephen Hopkins was sentenced to death but subsequently pardoned. Then there was yet a third mutiny, this time with a plot to murder the leaders of the settlement. This was too much, and this time a man was executed for the mutiny, Henry Paine, a persistent troublemaker.

The first boat sent toward Jamestown from Bermuda was lost at sea.

Two pinnaces were built during the nine or 10 months the people were stuck in Bermuda, the *Deliverance* and the *Patience*, from the islands’ then-abundant cedar trees and from spare parts salvaged from the wreck of the *Venture*. These vessels sailed on to Virginia May 10, 1610, leaving two men behind.

The *Deliverance* was about 80 tons, some 57 feet in

“Bermuda turned out to be uninhabited and also possessed copious numbers of birds and turtles to eat.”

length, with a 64-foot foremast, a 72-foot mainmast and a 44-foot mizzenmast. The *Patience* was about 30 tons.

Conditions at Jamestown were shocking beyond belief. Only some 39 men were still clinging to life, and it seemed likely that without help these living skeletons, barely able to walk, would also die within a few more days.

Dying was commonplace in early Virginia. Out of some 6,500 settlers sent during 1607-1622, only about 1,200 survived. Yet, by 1619, the colony was entrenched. On July 30, 1619, the first legislature in America, the House of Burgesses, assembled in a Jamestown church.

Indians launched a surprise attack March 22, 1622. Three hundred forty-seven English men, women and children were killed—a quarter of the total population. Friendly natives had warned Jamestown and several outlying settlements.

Even in Bermuda, there was a Starving Time, though not as bad as in Virginia proper. At one point the Spanish attacked, but providentially retreated when the Englishmen were down to one more cannonball. Luckily the Spaniards did not know that.

On June 19, 1610 Sir George Somers volunteered to return to Bermuda aboard the *Patience* for supplies for the struggling colony of Jamestown. He arrived in Bermuda, dying there in November of 1610. Capt. Matthew Somers returned to England aboard the *Patience* with his uncle's disemboweled body (the innards had been buried in Bermuda, while the rest of the body was apparently preserved in a cask of rum for the trip back to England). Three men were left on the islands at this time, to hold the claim. ♦

ENDNOTES:

1 Doherty, Kieran, *Sea Venture: Shipwreck, Survival and the Salvation of the First English Colony in the New World*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 2007.

2 Winchester, Simon, *Atlantic: Great Sea Battles, Heroic Discoveries, Titanic Storms, and a Vast Ocean of a Million Stories*, Harper, New York, 2010.

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Myths About Sir Walter Raleigh

Sir Walter Raleigh (above) was a central figure in several efforts to colonize the Americas. He was a favorite of Queen Elizabeth I for many years (until he had his head chopped off as a traitor) and was the one who suggested naming "Virginia" after "the virgin queen." However, several tales of Sir Walter are fraudulent.

1. Legend has it that Raleigh brought the first potatoes to the British Isles from the Americas. But it's more likely the potato arrived via Spain or Italy, and was widespread in Europe around the time Raleigh was born c. 1554. Raleigh did, however, grow potatoes at his manor in Ireland. Because of this, neighbors are alleged to have threatened to burn his house down. A nightshade family member, potatoes were believed to be poisonous.

2. Every schoolchild knows the story of Sir Walter throwing down his cloak over a muddy puddle so Queen Elizabeth would not have to soil her shoes and the hem of her long dress to cross it. The problem is, there is no proof the event ever happened. More likely the myth was made famous from Sir Walter Scott's romantic novel *Kenilworth* written in 1821, over 200 years after Raleigh's death. The scene piqued the public imagination and it quickly became a Victorian myth.

3. Raleigh is widely attributed with introducing tobacco to Europeans of the Elizabethan era. Although Raleigh was a smoker, he wasn't the first to bring it to Europe. The blame goes to Frenchman Jean Nicot. (It is from his name the word "nicotine" comes.) The first recorded mention of smoking in Britain was in 1556. (Raleigh was between two and four years old then.)