Historical Background

In 1606, King James I of England signed a charter for the Virginia Company of London to establish a settlement in Virginia. From the beginning, the settlement was intended to produce profit for its investors and was financed through the sale of shares of stock.

The English explored the New World almost a century after the Spanish reached its shores. The Spanish encountered well-established Indian groups with gold and other resources highly desired in Western Europe. Indeed, wherever they went in the Americas, the Spanish sought gold, silver, land, and social advancement. And, through superior military force, and the ravages of diseases hitherto unknown in the "New World," the Spanish conquered many Indians in Mexico, Peru, and the Caribbean, creating wealth and an elevated social status for themselves and funneling resources to Spain.

The English dreamed of similar wealth, hoping to find enough resources to sustain the colony and send riches back to shareholders across the Atlantic. They also hoped to find a water route to Asia. The English did not plan to establish populated colonies or plantations.

One hundred and four men and boys—both noblemen and commoners—signed on to make the trip to Jamestown. The Virginia Company chose seven men to serve on a council to lead the settlement. John Smith was the only one of the seven men who was not a nobleman, chosen because of his extensive experience with travel abroad. Once at Jamestown, Smith contributed to the success of the settlement through his forced work program (those who did not work, did not eat) and savvy interactions with the local Powhatans. He established trade with the Powhatans, formed a relationship with Pocahontas, and helped the colony survive.

Smith also meticulously recorded data from his time in Virginia. Smith’s notes and recollections provide historians with many details of life in Virginia during the early seventeenth century. Although Smith left Jamestown in the fall of 1609 and never returned to Virginia, he continued to publish information about his experiences for the rest of his life. Published in England in 1612 and distributed widely, this map of Virginia’s Chesapeake region is one of the best-known examples.