

The Roanoke Voyages

In 1584 Queen Elizabeth I of England granted Walter Raleigh the right to explore and settle “remote heathen and barbarous lands” in North America. The queen wanted to increase her country’s power and wealth. A permanent colony in the New World would provide the English empire with riches and natural resources. So with the queen’s blessing, Raleigh sponsored three voyages from England to America between 1584 and 1587.

Philip Amadas and Arthur Barlowe led the first voyage that Raleigh organized. (Raleigh himself did not go on any of the voyages.) Their expedition left England on two ships in the spring of 1584 and landed on Roanoke Island three months later. The men explored the region and traded with local Indians. When they returned to England, they took with them two powerful Indian chieftains named Wanchese and Manteo. Amadas and Barlowe reported that Roanoke Island would be an ideal place for a permanent English colony. Queen Elizabeth was delighted, and she knighted Walter Raleigh to reward him for the successful voyage.

The second voyage was led by Sir Richard Grenville and took place in 1585. Grenville commanded a fleet of seven ships and more than 500 soldiers and sailors. The purpose of this expedition was to establish a military colony on Roanoke Island. Ralph Lane was put in charge of the colony. He and his men began constructing a fort and houses shortly after arriving. Unfortunately, their relations with the Native tribes deteriorated as the colonists’ food supplies ran out. In 1586 the men abandoned the colony and returned to England.

In 1587 the third voyage carried another group of colonists to Roanoke Island. Many of this group were families. Led by artist John White, the settlers arrived too late in the year to plant crops, so White soon had to sail to England for supplies. Because of the war between England and Spain, he did not return to Roanoke Island for three years. When he finally arrived, he found the colony deserted. The only clue to the colonists’ fate was the word “Croatoan” carved on a tree. This led some people to believe that the colonists had either been taken or killed by the Croatan Indians. The vanished settlement became known as the “Lost Colony.”

Sir Walter Raleigh failed to establish a permanent English colony on Roanoke Island, but the knowledge gained from the Roanoke voyages helped in creating a permanent English colony at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. Roanoke Island Festival Park in Manteo celebrates this important part of North Carolina and American history. The 25-acre park has an interactive museum, a settlement site, living history programs, art, and live performances. For more information, visit <http://www.roanokeisland.com>.