**The Lost Colony of Roanoke: An Example of Historiographical Reform**

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In the preface of her book, Roanoke: The Abandoned Colony, Karen Ordahl Kupperman claims that Roanoke is a “twice forgotten colony.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Not only was the settlement abandoned by its supporters, but today it seems like a very small number of people know very much about the Lost Colony. Even fewer have any profound interest in the topic. By studying Roanoke’s history, historians have come to realize just how important the attempted establishment of the Roanoke Colony was in laying the groundwork for the emergence of the new American nation.[[2]](#footnote-2) That fact alone makes the Lost Colony of Roanoke a prime candidate for extensive historiographical analysis. The varying theories about what happened to the Lost Colonists and why the colony failed ensure that historians take care to look at the history of Roanoke from as many angles as possible. Furthermore, by studying Roanoke history over the last fifty years a historian can detect a shift in the scope of historical thought and research; one that moved from being intellectual to being more empirical. The revival of investigation into the disappearance of the colonists from Roanoke in the 21st century reflect the impact technology and science have had on the field of history, and how with each new innovation a new branch is added to the scope of historiographical research.

**Roanoke: An Abridged History**

In the late 16th century England was far from the greatness and glory it had amassed by the time of the American Revolution. Sir Walter Raleigh felt that one of the only ways for England to amount to its desired strength and power level was to establish colonies in the New World.[[3]](#footnote-3) The story of the attempt at establishing the colony was recorded by the likes of the younger Richard Hakluyt, Thomas Hariot, John White, and some more accounts by Ralph Lane, as well as from letters and bills that exchanged hands during the preparatory stages before the voyages launched. Because of the historical actors affiliated with Roanoke, a historian can know the colonists and financial supporters almost more intimately than some of the historical entities that have come along more recently.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Sir Walter Raleigh first sent over a small group to survey the surrounding area in order to make sure that it would be suitable for settlement. The two soldiers he sent as captains, Philip Amadas and Arthur Barlowe, explored the island region in 1584, noting the fertility of the land and the temperament of the native peoples. Specifically speaking on behalf of the Carolina Algonquians who welcomed them ashore, Barlowe said that they were “welcome with all love, kindness, and with as much bounty, after their manner, as they could possibly desire.”[[5]](#footnote-5) [[6]](#footnote-6) It was later discovered that heavy portions of Barlowe’s reports about their voyage had embellished the suitability of the land for subsistence agriculture and for establishing harbors.

The following two voyages consisted of two very different groups of settlers. The first, led by Ralph Lane, consisted of soldiers and vagabonds. They stayed at Roanoke about a year, during 1585 and 1586. They had little knowledge of agriculture which meant that they ended up having to rely on the Indians for food. The pressure this exerted on the Secotan tribe over time led to hostility and violence between the two conflicting cultures. The fighting and lack of supplies would send Lane and his soldiers back to England.

The second colony, led by John White, was a family-style, community based settlement. There were said to be roughly 117 people on the voyage. Most were single men, but there were a number of married couples, widows, servants, and a few children, as well. Two of the women were pregnant, one being White’s daughter, Eleanor. She would give birth shortly after their arrival in Roanoke. Her daughter, Virginia, would be the first European born in the New World. Despite this triumph, this colony would also be doomed by a lack of supplies. They elected White to return to England in 1587 in order to arrange for aid to be sent back across the Atlantic. He expected to return within the year. By the time he returned, however, after a three-year delay caused by sea wars with Spain, the colonists were long gone.

**Incorporating Relevant Trends**

While there are specific historiographical trends found in writing about Roanoke, such as Marxism and Nationalist history, a simpler way to compare and categorize historical research on Roanoke from about 1950 to the present is to start with more intellectual approaches, and work toward more empirical approaches, which began to incorporate scientific elements such as geology, geography, and archaeology. More rewarding still to the research process would be to compare the years when particular accounts were written. For example, while most writing from the 70s and 80s about Roanoke seemed to stem from purely document-based research, one account which will be discussed, an article on the effects of erosion on the Roanoke shoreline, was in fact published in 1972. This is particularly interesting to note, as this research definitely seems to push toward a more modernized, scientific approach to researching the Lost Colony of Roanoke, one that is shared by historians today, in the 21st century.

After Nationalist history began to call from more inclusive approaches to historiographical writing, some historians such as Hans Guggisberg stipulated the importance of including all relevant aspects of a nation’s historical career, even those which took place or started beyond its physical borders. His article, “European Influences in American Historiography,” provides a sound foundation for historical inquiry into Roanoke. Throughout the piece Guggisberg states that American history is not complete without recognizing the equal role European history also had in America’s emergence as an independent nation.[[7]](#footnote-7)

According to Guggisberg there are two different ways to link the history of Europe to the history of America. The first is concerned with time and the second on “the consciousness of a historical community in which America and Europe play equal roles as parts of the same Western World.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Guggisberg claims that the temporal approach to intertwining American and European history uses the European half as “pre-history” of America. This is the time period where sociocultural traditions and ideas were transposed from Europe and adapted to fit the emerging nation of America.[[9]](#footnote-9) The conclusion he comes to is that “the basic unity of European and American history is always there; the question is, however, how this unity is defined.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Reforming Methodology: Document-based research and the emergence of “scientific history.”**

Intellectual historiography is about ideas and thinkers. Roanoke historians belonging to this trend are people such as Karen Ordahl Kupperman, David Quinn, Thomas C. Parramore, and James Horn. Quinn is considered by many to be the ‘father of Roanoke history.’  The two volumes evaluated for this project, The Roanoke Voyages, are definitely impressive in length.  They are each comprised of the actual documents from Elizabethan England written by the historical actors connected with the Lost Colony of Roanoke.  Quinn has divided the books into sections based on the chronological story of Roanoke, interspersed with some sections on individuals such as Ralph Lane and Sir Francis Drake.  Kupperman even states at the outset of her book that anyone wishing to “explore further” into the disappearance of the Lost Colony of Roanoke should peruse the volumes put together by David B. Quinn. She claims that he “has put together all the documents connected with Roanoke.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Most of these were written by the younger, Reverend Richard Hakluyt, as well as some work by Thomas Hariot, John White, and Ralph Lane alongside a few legal documents. These two volumes complete The Roanoke Voyages I & II.

Kupperman herself provides a simple, cut and dry historical timeline of Roanoke from 1584 through its disappearance, in her book Roanoke: The Abandoned Colony. Kupperman doesn’t seem to make many theories of her own about how the colonists disappeared, instead sticking with Quinn’s assumptions that they were massacred by the Chesapeake Indians after their Powhatan was warned by his priests that harm was to befall him at the cause of White Men. The question must be raised as to whether some of her adherence to his interpretations is due to actual convictions in the historical evidence or due to personal feelings and opinions about the author.

There is one conclusion that goes beyond Quinn’s work, however. She perpetuates that Simon Fernandez was looking out the for colonists’ safety in 1587 when he told them that he and his crew had decided not to take them to the original destination of the Chesapeake Bay, but to leave them in Roanoke Island. Simon Fernandez was one of the assistants of John White for the second settlement, but that did not mean that they agreed on much. White made it clear in some of his journals that he felt Fernandez was to blame for the first colony’s failure. Kupperman cites how Fernandez’s “interest was in privateering and using the colony as a base, so he saw no reason why this voyage should not spend some time chasing ships.” [[12]](#footnote-12) David La Vere, James Horn, and Thomas Parramore all painted Fernandez as a ruthless treasure hunter who cared nothing for the well-being of the colonists. Kupperman seems to be the sole historian to acquit the pilot of vehemence. On page 112 she states that: “Fernandez may have been motivated by a desire to protect the colonists.” Kupperman notes that Fernandez still chose to stay with the fleet for a month while the colonists settled into their new home. She seemed to indicate that a man with purely selfish and greedy motives would not have done this. It’s also noted that since he may have known that the Chesapeake Indians were more hostile and warlike, and therefore posed a greater threat to the colonists than the Roanoke Indians.

Quinn himself fits in with the class of historians who wished mostly to report the truth of the past.  His Rankean style in this particular instance presents an almost encyclopedia-like account of the Roanoke voyages. Each chapter starts with Quinn narrating a brief summary of the documents readers are about to view, and uses those five to ten pages to also put forth some questions and interpretations.  For example, on page 11 he asks the following questions of Richard Hakluyt’s work: “Did Hakluyt suppress the unpleasant features of the 1584 voyage so idyllically presented by Arthur Barlowe?  Specifically, did the Indians kill and eat some of the sailors?” and “Why did he omit reference to Raymond’s marooning of men on Jamaica and Croatoan, and to Bernard Drake’s squadron which was intended to follow Grenville’s?...Did he omit a section in Lane’s account of the 1585-86 colony…?”[[13]](#footnote-13)  To answer a lot of his questions, he did so in his footnotes.  This is where most of the analysis takes place in the two volumes.

While the amount of research put into these works is incredible, it does seem at times that there is a little bit too much in the footnotes.  Some historians who have read through Quinn’s works, for instance, have concluded that he tried too hard to stick to the truth.  In doing this, not only did some of the information become obscured, but he may not have adequately analyzed and researched some of the “myths” that he was so quick to put to rest.

There is also the question of bias.  Quinn wrote much of his Roanoke history in the years approaching the quadricentennial of the landing at Roanoke.  He was even involved in the committee, run by the governor of North Carolina, that would put on a celebration for this 400 year anniversary..  The goal was to draw tourism to the island now that the Fort was being rebuilt.  So the question must be asked as to whether Quinn really was as dedicated to reporting the truth of Roanoke history as he claimed, or whether he was trying to come up with the best story in order to draw in an audience?[[14]](#footnote-14) The same question can be said for the sources used, mainly those of Hakluyt.  These official writings were most likely tailored to reflect the few good results Roanoke garnered, as they would be used to plan for future colonization attempts. The early writings after the 1584 voyage and 1585-6 voyage would have had to paint as positive a picture of Roanoke as possible in order to keep the interest of the financial supporters paying for the colony’s establishment.

There are those historians that vehemently go against Quinn’s theories, though some, such as James Horn, found his information useful in researching for their own work. James Horn’s A Kingdom Strange: The Brief and Tragic History of the Lost Colony of Roanoke, belongs to the sect of narrative history. It is evident that he relied heavily on the works of David Beers Quinn to gather most of his information about Roanoke, which at first leads one to speculate whether or not he could really have the full picture of the Lost Colony’s history, restricting himself so heavily to one writer.  However, there were two indications that he used the works of William Strachey, from the Jamestown expedition. This is important, because it is likely from this source that he came to his conclusions about the fate of the colonists, which differs from Quinn’s belief that the colonists merged with a group of Chesapeake Indians.  Horn’s theory actually coincides with the story told of the Chowan River Stone, detailed in a 2009 article by David La Vere.

The article specifically focused on the Chowan River Stone discovered in 1937.  It is a prime example of why historians should not write off Roanoke as being ‘unsolvable.’  This is a highly analytical piece, where he takes the lines supposedly dictated by Eleanor Dare and compares them to interpretations about the Lost Colony’s fate that other historians have come up with over the years.  Particularly, he targets David Beers Quinn.  La Vere is one of the Roanoke historians who seemed to veer more toward empirical rather than intellectual history, specifically in research purposes. The first thing he does in the article before going into analysis, however, is to provide the information from the face of the stone:

Clues indicated they had gone south to Croatoan Island on the Outer Banks. But

White was unable to search for them, and the colonists were lost to history…seemingly

Carved at the behest of Eleanor White Dare, daughter of Governor White, the stone’s

Inscription told of a horrific Indian attack in 1591 that wiped out most of the Lost

Colony. They buried their dead on a small hill nearby; their names were carved on a

Second stone. The stone detailing the attack was to be taken to John White.[[15]](#footnote-15)

La Vere notes how the questions about its legitimacy can be answered by the evidence given by history.  The story the stone told fits with the interpretations of 16th and 17th century reports about what happened to the colonists.  Also, if it were a fake, the person responsible would need to be fluent in Elizabethan English and all things Roanoke.  They also had to make sure that it aligned with the prominent theories about Roanoke at the time.  In the early 20th centuries it was believed by most historians and scholars that the colonists came in contact with the Hatteras Indians on Croatoan Island and took refuge in their community.  Other theories put them to the southeast.  The question he then asked was: “It seems unlikely that a forger would place it [the Chowan River Stone] near the Chowan River.  Who would think to look there?”[[16]](#footnote-16)  Now, the events inscribed on the face of the stone fit well with what we have further discovered about the Lost Colony.  In fact, though he concludes that there is really no way to determine whether the stone is truly authentic, it did help lead scholars in a new direction of thinking that did fit with the resources used for research.  His overall theme seems to be the notion that re-evaluating historical evidence over time, such as that provided by the Chowan River Dare stone, will lead to new interpretations.  Specifically, La Vere points to the use of dating and geology to physically examine the rock face.

Now, going back to James Horn’s theory about what happened to the colonists, two accounts Horn uses to support his theories come from Edward Bland, who led a group of settlers in the New World in 1650, and a similar account from Strachey in 1609.  According to this story, most of the settlers had come to settle at one of the tributaries on the south of the Chowan River.  They had assimilated into Indian culture, not forgetting their English background, but still choosing to adopt the cultural ways and customs of the Indians they now called family.  Machumps, one of the Indians, told Strachey in 1609 that “the lost colonists were killed by the Powhatans at the same time that Captain Newport was exploring the lower reaches of the Chesapeake Bay and the James River in April and May of 1607.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Forty years later an Indian guide detailed a similar attack to Edward Bland.  The Indian pointed out a spot between two trees that is said to be the place where a chief of the Chowanoc Indians was killed.  Over 600 Indians were killed by the Chesapeake's in a single morning, and the site became sacred to the Chowanocs.  The guide also pointed to a field three miles from the Chowan River where “heaps of bones were piled up.”  Is this the site detailed by the inscription on the Chowan River Dare Stone, perhaps?  It certainly seems to corroborate the fate of the colonists that was supposedly told by Eleanor White Dare.  While one may be quick to question Horn’s bias and credibility due his heavy reliance on the work of David Beers Quinn, the fact that he was able to draw his conclusion about the colonists’ fate from Strachey’s account and reconcile it with the one told to Edward Bland in 1650 gives him some credibility as a researcher and as an historian.

Horn also takes a page out of Kupperman’s methodology as well, being that before he begins to theorize the fate of the colonists, he first provides an extensive history of the Roanoke voyages. One thing that Horn did that really makes him stand out as a writer of narrative history is to not only provide the facts surrounding life in Roanoke, but also include a lot of crucial information about the behind the scenes efforts that made the voyages possible in the first place.  For example, in planning for the 1587 colony, the settlers were attracted by each other, and a lot by John White himself.

Horn explains why this colony is to be different than Ralph Lane’s, because while the former existed as a sort of military garrison filled with soldiers, the latter would comprise individuals from England’s ever-growing, and prosperous middle class.  These were the people who helped stimulate the trade boom that emerged in Elizabethan England in the 1580s.  Of John White in particular, he cites that another of the main reasons for trying to attract the middle class was so that there were strong family connections, which would help keep morale up during the venture and also promote unity among the colonists.  Horn states that “at least a third of the settlers were related to other members of the group...some probably had relatives among them who had been involved in previous voyages or were in Raleigh’s service.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Thomas C Parramore’s research is more intellectually document based than La Vere’s more scientific approach to historiography, but his attention to small details in a historical circumstance puts him more in a position of an empirical or erudite historian. These historians rely on sensory experiences and broad knowledge of a topic to aid them in researching and in analyzing the work of others.

In his article, “The Lost Colony Found: A Documentary Perspective,” Parramore takes aim at David Beers Quinn’s The Lost Colonists: Their Fortune and Probable Fate. Parramore charges Quinn for misconstruing statements from Captain John Smith and William Strachey. He claims that Quinn particularly misinterpreted Strachey’s words when he says, “At Roanoke.” Parramore states: “Seventeenth century Virginians used the name Roanoke to signify the region bordering what some early maps call the Sea of Roanoke, modern Albemarle and Currituck Sounds. It was the region that became Carolina on the northern sounds that Strachey was referring to.”[[19]](#footnote-19) That being said, Strachey’s account puts the Roanoke slaughter and the attack by Powhatan at different places. This completely refutes Quinn’s theories about the settlers’ deaths.

Parramore is careful to substantiate this with geographical evidence. It is widely known that following John White’s departure in 1587 that the colonists planned to move 50 miles inland. The southern portion of the Chesapeake Bay, where Quinn puts the colonists and Powhatan’s attack, is about 130 miles from Roanoke Island.[[20]](#footnote-20) Lastly, Parramore concludes” A massacre of the Chesapeakes and colonists would have stirred some excitement in the Jamestown area, but it appears to have generated not a ripple.”[[21]](#footnote-21) He then reconciles with the likes of David La Vere and James Horn, placing the settlers at having ended up near the Chowan River.

Throughout the article Parramore used examples from primary sources to discount Quinn, insinuating that he has just misinterpreted the meanings he read during his research. It shows how having multiple people evaluate and reflect upon a specific source is important, because no one will read it and interpret it in exactly the same way. In the end, Parramore concludes that the only way to figure out what happened to the colonists is to do further research. His writing emerged at the dawn of the 21st century, when interest in Roanoke seemed all but dead. Parramore abhorred that this was happening, and called for research on the Lost Colony to begin again with vigor.[[22]](#footnote-22)

With a renewed interest in the fate of the Lost Colonists of Roanoke, the 21st century has much to offer historical research in terms of research methodology. Thanks to the ever-widening field of technology, the scope for historical research is only being broadened. Particularly, as forensic science has evolved, historians gained the ability to consult DNA as historical evidence. This is particularly valuable in cases such as the Lumbee Indians of North Carolina, who are fighting for federal recognition. Cindy Padget relays that the 40,000 member tribe believes themselves to be descended from the Lost Colonists of Roanoke. They have roots in Cherokee, Cheraw, and Hatteras tribes. The Hatteras Indians, in particular, are believed to have had much contact with the settlers after they left the island in 1587.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Padget cites work from Adolph L. Dial, who supports the controversial theory. The problem is that the theory is the key to their gaining federal recognition, but it is obviously poorly documented physically, having mostly transgressed through time in the form of oral tradition.[[24]](#footnote-24) This is an instance where politics have interferred. Padget writes that the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the majority of the federal government do not even believe the Lumbees to even be legitimate Native Americans, simply because they “look white.”[[25]](#footnote-25) The real truth boiled down to money, however, as since the Lumbee are so large in number, the BIA fears that recognizing them would drain monetary resources away from other tribes.

Padget proposes that in order to substantiate the Lost Colony theory, research needs to actually look at alternative, yet complementary theories, such as the Lumbees descending from the Cherokees or Tuscaroras. She delves heavily into the Tuscarora theory, which purports that the Lost Colony theory is fake and that the Lumbee are entirely descended from the Tuscaroras. However, after evaluating each account, Padget intimates the Lost Colony theory as being the most logical. She also recognizes that the truth could encompass multiple theories since she cites Dial as claiming white settlers. Lastly, Padget uses geographical evidence to point out that few Tuscaroras lived in Robeson County, North Carolina, before the early 18th century.

Finally, there is an article about shoreline erosion by Robert Dolan and Kenton Bosserman from 1972 that is vital to researching the fate of Roanoke. Without looking at any of the bibliographical information, a researcher reading this article would probably assume that it was fairly recent, meaning that it was written after the year 2000. The methodology they call for, being archaeological and topographical in nature, are so science oriented that one may even overlook this as being relevant to the discussion about Roanoke. This type of research could be the missing link to finding out the fate of the colonists, and the fact is that it was written 45 years ago. In an academic world where social and cultural history was being valued, “scientific history” did not necessarily fit with the mainstream trends of the late 20th century.

Dolan’s and Bosserman’s account uses maps and archaeological studies as primary sources, which in turn required topographical analysis to take place. They had to do this for a period spanning 385 years. The two undertook this task to support their conclusions that “the location of the settlement is now in Roanoke Sound, and that artifacts have been corroded, dispersed, and buried in the waters adjacent to the present shoreline.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Both note that between 1851 and 1970 the northern part of the island receded over 900 feet. They were then able to look at each shoreline and hypothesize that, if, in 120 years, that much ground was lost, twice as much ground was probably lost in the 265 years between 1590 and 1851. They say that at least a quarter mile of land along the northern shorelines, in particular, have disappeared into the Atlantic Ocean. This would include the area where the Roanoke settlement was supposedly established.[[27]](#footnote-27) The fact that almost no physical evidence of the colony has been found on land by archaeologists supports this. Their study uses data instead of just physical documents, such as an article by JC Harrington called “Searching for the Cittie of Raleigh,” meaning that the scope for historical research was widened once again. This boosts the chance for new insights and also helps Dolan and Bosserman’s article maintain sound credibility, by relying mostly on the numbers and on the effects of 400 years of nature.

In order to fill the gaps in researching the Lost Colony of Roanoke, it seems that historians need to look closer at the more scientific aspects of history, such as geography, archaeology, and climate history, as demonstrated by Dolan and Bosserman. There may also now be opportunities to use DNA evidence in research, as well, as suggested by Cindy Padget. It is also evident that historians need to return focus to the Chowan River area as the possible site of the colonists’ demise. In the 80 years since the discovery of the Chowan River Dare Stone, it seems like historians are only finding more evidence that supports the story inscribed on the stone’s surface. Based on how far they planned to travel inward and the nature of the Indian tribes in the Chesapeake Bay area, it seems more and more likely that the colonists would choose to remain closer to Roanoke and Croatoan island and settle with allies of the Carolina Algonquians, such as Manteo’s tribe of Weapemeoc’s. David Beers Quinn’s legacy of heavily document-based historiographical research is becoming obsolete. Instead, historians are becoming more aware that in order to completely research a topic, a lot more than document-based history needs to be considered.

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