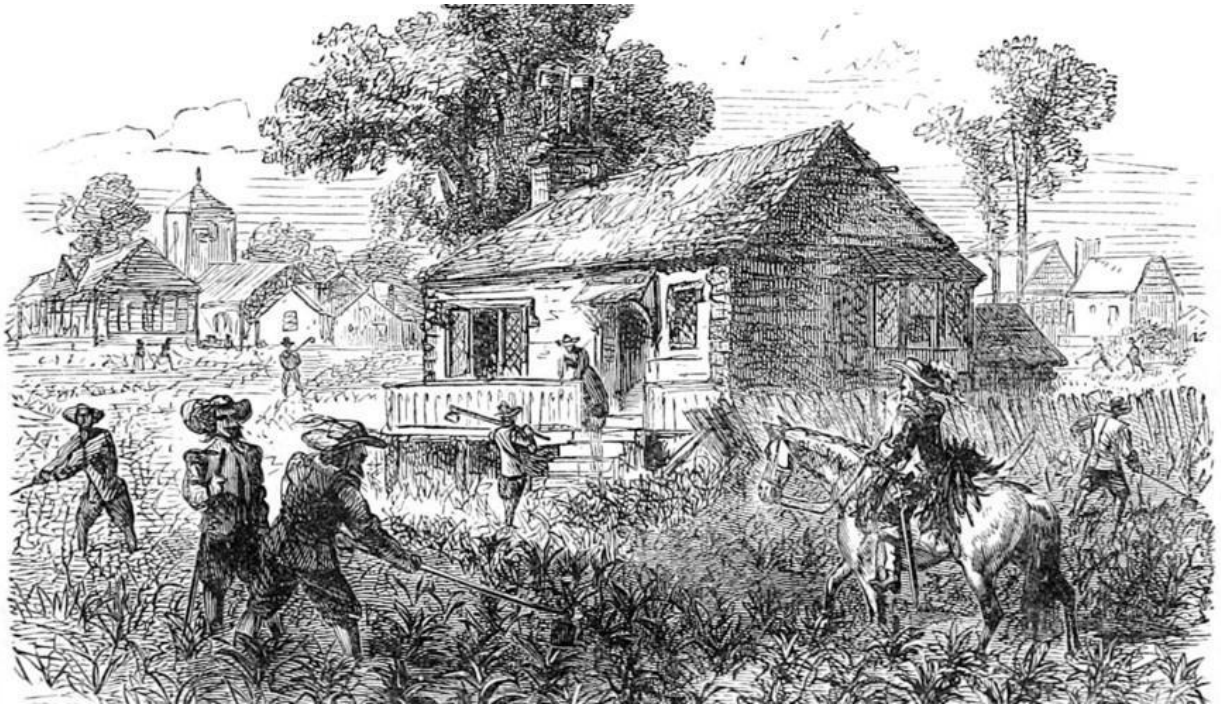


The Growth of the Tobacco Trade in America

By USHistory.org, adapted by Newsela staff



An 1878 depiction of tobacco cultivation at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1615. Photo from Wikimedia Commons

The Virginia Company of London was the first joint-stock company to launch a business in the American colonies. Joint-stock companies are like modern companies. Stock, or parts of the company, was sold to rich investors. These investors gave money to set up the colonies. They took on the risk that the colonies might fail and they might lose their money. The rich businessmen in the Virginia Company of London had one goal in mind: gold.

In 1607, a group of English men established the first colony in the United States. It was called Jamestown colony and was located in Virginia.

The colonists were told that they had to make money. Otherwise, the businessmen would stop supporting them. Many of the men spent their days looking for gold, but they didn't find any.

The Virginia Company of London needed new ways to make money. Jamestown settlers tried glassblowing, growing grapes for wine and even silkworm farming. By the end of the 1620s, only one Virginia crop was making money: tobacco.

"Drinking smoke"

The Spanish first introduced tobacco to the Englishmen. The Spanish had learned to smoke it from Native Americans. Tobacco was sometimes called "drinking smoke." It became popular in England. Much of the tobacco smoked in England was grown in the Caribbean islands.

Thomas Hariot was an early English explorer. He wrote about tobacco use in the American colonies. He wrote that tobacco use "not only preserves the body, but if there are any obstructions it breaks them up. By this means the natives keep in excellent health."

Not everyone liked tobacco, including King James I of England. He wrote: "Smoking is...hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs."

Growing tobacco in Virginia

English settler John Rolfe smoked a lot of tobacco. He thought Virginia might be a perfect spot for growing it. His plan did not work at first. Smokers felt that the tobacco of the Caribbean was much milder than Virginian tobacco. Virginian tobacco was too harsh.

So, Rolfe imported seed from the Caribbean. Then, he grew Caribbean tobacco in the Jamestown colony. By 1630, over a million and a half pounds of tobacco were being exported from Jamestown to England every year.

But growing tobacco is hard on the soil. Only about three successful growing seasons can take place on a plot of land. Then, the land had to lie empty for three years before the soil could be used again. The settlers wanted more farmland to grow tobacco on.

Settlers grew tobacco in the streets of Jamestown. The crop even covered graveyards. Because farming tobacco is tough work, more settlers were needed.

Indentured servants

Indentured servants became the first way to meet the need for workers. In return for a free boat ride to Virginia, an indentured servant worked for four to five years in the fields. Then he or she was given freedom. England rewarded farmers with 50 acres of land for every person they brought to the New World.

It was hard for landowners to keep indentured servants and slaves. Servants and slaves often ran away from abusive masters. Virginia lawmakers passed laws that would punish servants and slaves, sometimes branding them. In March 1642, Virginia lawmakers passed a law on runaway slaves that read:

"Be it therefore enacted and confirmed that all runaways that shall absent themselves from their said masters service shall be liable to make satisfaction ... by indenture double the time of service so neglected. And if such runaways shall be found to transgress the second time or oftener (if it shall be duly proved against them) that then they shall be branded in the cheek with the letter R. and pass under the statute of incorrigible rogues."

The lawmakers were trying to harshly control indentured servants and slaves so that the colony would grow bigger.