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Environment, disease and mortality in early Virginia

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Abstract

Early Virginia (1607-24) was a nightmarish world of disease and death, perhaps uncurpassed in the annals of English colonization. Typhoid fever and dysentery visited Jamestown in recurrent epidemics killing 30 per cent or more of the colonists with each onslaught. Yet Jamestown endured because the leaders of the Virginia Company misapprehended the nexus between the estuarine environment and water-borne, non-immunizing diseases. Each summer, death stalked the town as invading salt water pushed up the estuary and concentrated pathogens in the town's water supply. The prevention of disease and death required the abandonment of Jamestown and relocation into healthier niches, which occurred with the dissolution of the Virginia Company in 1624.



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