

Raleigh, Sir Walter ^[1]

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Sir Walter Raleigh*: An English Renaissance Man

by Amy Rudersdorf, 2011.
[Government & Heritage Library](#) ^[2].

See also: [Raleigh \(or Raleigh\), Sir Walter](#) ^[3]



Painting "Sir Walter Raleigh" at Court House Annex, Richmond, Virginia. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

^[4]Early Years

Walter Raleigh was born into one of England's most illustrious ages. He was six in 1558 when [Queen Elizabeth I](#) ^[5] took the throne to reign for over 44 years. Her rule saw the spark of the [English Renaissance](#) ^[6], especially in the dramatic arts, and is widely considered Britain's "Golden Age." It was also a time of great exploration and expansion of Britain's colonial holdings. Seafaring adventurers like Raleigh and [Sir Francis Drake](#) ^[7] would lead many of the expeditions that would make Britain a global power for the next three hundred years.

Raleigh was born in Devonshire, in the South of England, not into nobility (the royal class to which membership was restricted through heredity), but the gentry (the social class just below nobility, which was often educated and land-owning). His father was a "gentleman of property," and, appropriate to his social rank, Raleigh was sent to a university at Oxford before studying Law in London.

Soldier and Sailor

With his half brother, [Sir Humphrey Gilbert](#) ^[8], Raleigh would participate in his first military actions in France at age 17 and in the first of many engagements against the Spanish in 1578. Raleigh and Gilbert's partnership would continue for years and span continents as they campaigned through Europe and explored the Americas. In 1578, they set off for Greenland (in search, it is thought, for a Northwest Passage to the "Orient"). After hitting storms and rough waters, the trip turned into one less of global expansion and more of unsanctioned privateering (basically, a polite word for "pirating"). All seven ships in the fleet retreated to England within six months. Only Raleigh's ship, the *Falcon*, made it any distance. Upon their return, Raleigh was imprisoned briefly for his impunity.

Courtier

By 1580, Raleigh was already well known at the court of Queen Elizabeth I. He was arrested twice that year for dueling. He was considered handsome, brash, and flamboyant by his peers and ruthless in his politics. Still, Elizabeth took him on as an advisor on issues related to, among others, Ireland and mining concerns in southern England. He was knighted in 1584 (giving him the title "Sir") and by 1586 was captain of the Queen's Guard (the military units charged with guarding the official residences of the royal family).

Virginia and the Lost Colony

While Raleigh, himself, never stepped foot on the soil that would one day be known as "North Carolina," he is responsible for funding several voyages to colonize the coastline North of Florida. The first expedition in 1584 brought the ships of captains [Philip Amadas](#) ^[9] and [Arthur Barlowe](#) ^[10] as far north as Pamlico Sound. While they never actually reached the area that would become the State of Virginia, the area running from roughly South Carolina to the Virginia coastline was given that name, probably by Raleigh or Queen Elizabeth I, upon their return to England.

The next year, Raleigh sent out his first group of settlers to colonize the New World. They landed at Secotan Island (now [Roanoke Island](#) ^[11]), a place already known for its grim history of bloodshed. Attempts to settle Roanoke continued, but generally proved unsuccessful. Still, in August 1587, a group of 115 men, women, and children landed on the island with intent to settle it for good. The colonists included [Virginia Dare](#) ^[12] — the first English child born (on the 18th of that month) in North America. Led by [Governor John White](#) ^[13] and financed again by Raleigh, this group continued the bleak history of Roanoke to become what is widely known in English and American history as "[The Lost Colony](#)" ^[11].

The colony immediately struck upon one difficulty after another, including a lack of food and shelter, and poor relations with the native tribes that had long lived in the area. This included the Croatan, who, it is generally believed, remain unfriendly to the colonists due in large part to the brutality of earlier English settlers. With every intention of an immediate return, Governor White set sail for England late in 1587 to request rations and assistance against the native tribes. By the time he was able to return, over three years later, the settlement had been deserted. The only clue to the colonists' whereabouts was the word "Croatan" carved onto a post. It is possible the colonists moved their settlement to the neighboring Croatan Island, but due to impending storms and the unwillingness of his men, White was unable to search for them. Their outcomes remain a mystery to this day.

Historian, Scientist, and Poet

Among other strange and remarkable plants brought back to Europe from the New World, including tobacco, Raleigh is credited with introducing the potato to Ireland. Loudon's *Encyclopedia of agriculture* ^[14] (1825) states that "The potatoe . . . was brought first out of Virginia by Sir [Walter Raleigh](#) [sic]; and he stopping at Ireland, some was planted there, where it thrived very well, and to good purpose . . ." (page 44). This point is still contended, however, as the Irish had long traded with the Spanish, who were exploring the Americas even before Raleigh arrived there. Still, a statue erected in 1810 commemorates the spot where Raleigh's potato first saw Irish soil.

During the 1590s, Raleigh traveled to Venezuela, Guyana, and the Azorean Islands (located in the Atlantic Ocean about 1,000 miles West of Portugal). He published an account of his South American explorations, called *The Discovery of Guiana* ^[15], in 1596. Other writings penned by Raleigh include numerous poems, as well as world histories, personal accounts of his experiences in government and the military, treatises on ship mechanics and the Royal Navy, and his posthumously published *Instructions to his son and posterity* ^[16] (1632).

Conspiracy and execution

A secret, unauthorized marriage to Elizabeth Throckmorton (or Throgmorton), one of the Queen's "maids of honor" (who could not marry without approval from the Queen), caused a rupture of the ties between Raleigh and the Queen. Upon his return from sea in 1592, Raleigh and Throckmorton were imprisoned in the Tower of London (a historic castle and notorious prison) for their indiscretions. Soon released, the couple would eventually have three sons (the first died in infancy).

This was the beginning of the end of Raleigh's power and prestige, however. Failed endeavors to find gold mines in South America (pursuing, it is thought, tales of El Dorado and the Lost City of Gold) only added to his fall. The final blow came in 1603, following the death of Elizabeth, and James I's accession to the throne. Raleigh was at odds with the new King's peace policies and in the throes of bankruptcy. As such, Raleigh had lost much of the political power he had once held. Accused of conspiracy against the throne, Raleigh was again imprisoned in the Tower later that same year. After what is widely considered today as nothing more than a show trial, Raleigh was convicted of the conspiracy charge and sentenced to death. Stripped of all remaining lands and accounts, Raleigh remained in the Tower for thirteen years. He was briefly released but finally executed by beheading on October 29, 1618.

**A note about Sir Walter Raleigh's name: According to Jokinen (2011), "Raleigh's name can be found spelled in over 70 different ways in contemporary documents. Raleigh himself signed it variously, finally settling on 'Raleigh' — it is to be noted, however, that Raleigh himself never spelled it with an 'i,' as 'Raleigh.'" It was common for words and names to be spelled different ways during the time Raleigh was alive because spelling was not standardized.*

Image credit:

"Painting 'Sir Walter Raleigh' at Court House Annex, Richmond, Virginia." Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Reproduction no. LC-DIG-highsm-02420. Online at: <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/highsm.02420/> ^[4].

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[5] <https://www.folger.edu/queen-elizabeth-i>

[6] http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/tudors/renaissance_europe_01.shtml

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[16] <https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/574319>

[17] <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1595raleigh-guiana.asp>

[18] http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/raleigh_walter.shtml

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