

The Myths We Inherited: Rethinking Colonization in 1600s America

For most of us, the story of America's beginnings arrives pre-packaged. Brave settlers crossed the ocean. They built small communities in the wilderness. They traded with Native peoples. Hardship followed, but perseverance won. It is a story neat enough to teach to children, short enough for textbooks, and comforting enough to repeat without much thought.

It is also wildly incomplete.

Colonization in the 1600s was not primarily a tale of humble survival. It was a business venture, a religious experiment, and a political strategy. It involved not just courage and endurance, but violence, displacement, and calculated exploitation. The myths we inherited were never neutral. They were designed to make conquest sound like destiny.

One of the most persistent misconceptions is that early colonists came simply to escape persecution and seek freedom. While some did, especially religious dissenters such as the Puritans, they were not the majority. Many settlers were sponsored by joint-stock companies whose primary purpose was profit. The Virginia Company did not finance Jamestown out of moral conviction. It expected returns. Land was capital. Resources were opportunity. Indigenous territory was not seen as inhabited space but as an asset waiting to be claimed.

Another common distortion is the idea that Native peoples were passive participants in colonization, either welcoming settlers or fading quietly into the background. In reality, Indigenous nations were politically complex, strategically minded, and often resistant. Alliances were negotiated when useful, broken when exploited, and enforced through warfare when necessary. The violence that followed was not accidental. It was structural. Colonization required land, and land required removal.

Textbook language often masks this reality. Words like “settlement,” “expansion,” and “frontier” soften what was, in practice, the systematic dispossession of Native communities. When village were burned, it was called defense. When crops were destroyed, it was called strategy. When entire populations were displaced, it was framed as progress. The vocabulary of colonization did not just describe events.

It justified them.

There is also the persistent myth of mutual benefit, the idea that trade and cooperation defined early colonial relationships. While moments of cooperation existed, they were shaped by massive power imbalance. European diseases alone decimated Indigenous populations long before formal conquest could. Trade agreements were frequently manipulated through coercion, deception, or military threat. Colonists did not enter an empty world. They entered a populated one and reorganized it to suit their needs.

Even the image of the struggling settler, barely surviving against nature, deserves scrutiny. Many early colonies did fail, often due to poor planning, internal conflict, or unrealistic expectations. But the narrative of helplessness conveniently obscures the reality that survival was frequently made possible through the labor, knowledge, and forced displacement of Indigenous peoples. Agricultural techniques, local geography, and trade routes were not discovered.

They were taken.

Why do these myths persist? Because nations, like individuals, prefer origin stories that feel heroic. It is easier to celebrate endurance than to confront exploitation. It is more comfortable to teach children about log cabins and perseverance than about land theft and cultural erasure. But history does not become less true because it is inconvenient.

Reexamining colonization is not about rewriting the past to inspire guilt. It is about telling the

truth without filters. The United States did not emerge from a vacuum. It was built within systems of power that rewarded conquest and normalized displacement. Ignoring that reality does not preserve heritage.

It distorts it.

Understanding the 1600s honestly forces us to see colonization not as a singular moment of bravery, but as the beginning of a long process whose consequences are still visible. It reminds us that national identity was shaped not only by ideals of freedom and faith, but by economic ambition and territorial control.

History does not ask us to choose between pride and honesty. It asks us to grow up enough to hold both. We can acknowledge endurance without romanticizing conquest. We can honor survival without sanitizing harm. The story of early America is not smaller when told truthfully. It is larger, more complicated, and far more human.

And finally, it becomes something worth understanding, not just repeating.