

The Atlantic

The Mail-Order Brides of Jamestown, Virginia

In its early days, the first English settlement in America had lots of men, tobacco, and land. All it needed was women.



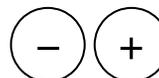
An 1882 illustration depicting the arrival of the first women to the Jamestown colony

Bettmann / Getty

MARCIA ZUG

7:00 AM ET | BUSINESS

TEXT SIZE



Like *The Atlantic*? Subscribe to the [Daily](#), our free weekday email newsletter.

SIGN UP

“First comes love, then comes marriage,” the old nursery rhyme goes, but historically, first came money. Marriage was above all an economic transaction, and in no place was this more apparent than in the early 1600s in the Jamestown colony, where a severe gender imbalance threatened the fledgling colony’s future.

The men of Jamestown desperately wanted wives, but women were refusing to immigrate. They had heard disturbing reports of dissension, famine, and disease, and had decided it simply wasn't worth it. Consequently, barely a decade after its founding in 1607, Jamestown was almost entirely male, and because these men were unable to find wives, they were deserting the colony in droves.

An immediate influx of women was needed to save the floundering colony; its leaders suggested putting out an advertisement targeting wives. The women who responded to this marital request and agreed to marry unknown men in an unfamiliar land were in a sense America's first mail-order brides.

The primary proponent of marital immigration was the Virginia Company treasurer Edwin Sandys, who successfully convinced his fellow board members that this was the best way to increase the colony's female population, make "the men more settled [and] lesse moveable," and decrease the number who "stay [in the colony] but to gett something and then return for England."

The Virginia Company offered substantial incentives to the women who signed up.

Sandys's harder task was persuading potential brides to come to Jamestown. Luckily, the financial obstacles to marriage in 17th-century England worked in his favor. Securing a home and setting up a domestic household were expensive. And unless they were born into wealth, most men and women needed to amass a significant nest egg before they could marry. For working-class Englishwomen, this typically meant years of domestic service. *Downton Abbey* notwithstanding, many found the prospect of scrubbing other people's floors and chamber pots less than appealing. Marital immigration offered an attractive alternative.

The Virginia Company offered substantial incentives to the women who signed up to leave England for Jamestown. They were provided a dowry of clothing, linens, and other furnishings, free transportation to the colony, and even a plot of land. They were also promised their pick of wealthy husbands and provided with food

and shelter while they made their decision. Like a 17th-century version of *The Bachelorette*, the women entertained dozens of eager suitors before eventually determining which one would receive the metaphorical rose.

After a husband was chosen, he would reimburse the Virginia Company for the travel expenses, furnishings, and land with 120 pounds (later raised to 150) of “good leaf” tobacco. This is roughly equivalent to \$5,000 in today’s currency—an amount that only the relatively well-off could afford to part with. The tobacco payment was intended to cover the cost of the woman’s passage to Virginia and is why the Jamestown brides are sometimes referred to as “tobacco wives.” It is also why the women are frequently accused of having been sold.

Nevertheless, this characterization is false and reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the status of women in Jamestown. Although the financially strapped Virginia Company was eager to recoup the costs of sponsoring the Jamestown brides, it was not selling women. The arriving brides had full control over their marital choice, and the Company even accepted the possibility that with this freedom a woman might “unwarily or fondly ... bestow her self” on a man who didn’t have enough wealth to put up 120 pounds of tobacco. If that happened, the Company simply requested that the man pay them back if and when he was able to do so.

The fact that the Jamestown brides were not sold is important and represents a conscious decision by the Company, which could have, as was easy and common at the time, kidnapped potential colonists instead. In 1615, King James responded to Virginia Governor Thomas Dale’s request for more colonists by shipping a hundred male felons to the colony. Shortly thereafter, a similar number of street urchins were rounded up and sent to Virginia.

These kidnappings were government-sponsored, but after the Virginia Company instituted a new incentive for immigrants in 1617, private individuals also began kidnapping men and women for the colonies. Under this new arrangement, called the headright system, settlers who financed their own passage to the Virginia colony received 50-acre tracts of land. The same amount of land was offered to anyone

willing to sponsor the passage of a new settler. Speculators and planters were eager to take advantage of the latter offer, but they had difficulty finding willing recruits. Paying men and women to kidnap settlers solved this problem. By mid-century, thousands of unwilling immigrants were being shipped to the colony as indentured servants every year. One particularly prolific kidnapper was rumored to have abducted more than 6,000 victims.

In 1684, a couple was fined only 12 pence for kidnapping and selling a 16-year-old girl. In comparison, a horse thief would have been hanged.

So, if the Virginia Company had wanted to kidnap women to have enough colonial wives, it could have done so. In fact, in 1618 a man named Owen Evans, a messenger for the Privy Council, a group which directly advised the king, decided to try, and he nearly succeeded. Claiming he had government approval, Evans traveled to Somerset, England, and began forcing dozens of young women onto ships. Luckily, his deception was quickly exposed and the women were freed. Owens was then charged with treason and hanged, drawn, and quartered. However, the crime he was punished for was not kidnapping, but falsely using the king's seal, a direct usurpation of royal authority. The kidnapping was barely mentioned.

Indeed, although private kidnappings were technically illegal, prosecutions were rare and punishments were minimal. In 1680, a woman named Ann Servant was fined a mere 13 shillings and sixpence for kidnapping and selling a young woman named Alice Flax. Similarly, in 1684, a couple was fined only 12 pence for kidnapping and selling a 16-year-old girl. In comparison, a horse thief would have been hanged.

Regardless of whether they could have gotten away with kidnapping, the leaders of the Virginia Company believed the role of colonial wife was too important to leave to reluctant or unwilling women. Instead, they insisted on voluntary marital

immigration, which was a wise decision: A century later, French Louisiana attempted to solve its gender imbalance through forced immigration and the results were disastrous. Hundreds of women from Paris's penitentiaries were shipped in to populate Louisiana. These women had no interest in marriage or the fate of the colony and they rapidly transformed it into a hotbed of crime and debauchery. In contrast, the voluntary immigration of women eager to start new lives in the New World is what made Jamestown's bridal program a success.

It also had lasting implications for the colony's gender relations. The colonial government offered female colonists freedoms and opportunities unavailable to most 17th-century Englishwomen. For instance, married women were subject to a legal disability known as coverture, or "covered woman." Coverture held that upon marriage, a woman's independent legal identity was subsumed or "covered" by her husband's. Accordingly, married women in England could not hold property in their own name, alter or dispose of property without their husband's consent (even if they inherited the property), make wills, or appoint executors without their husband's agreement.

But in Virginia, the need for female immigration frequently caused leaders to relax or ignore the rules of coverture. In fact, even before the Jamestown brides were recruited, members of the Virginia House of Burgesses had recognized the unique position of female colonists and asked the Virginia Company to set aside parcels of land for both male and female colonists because "[i]n a new plantation it is not known whether man or woman be the most necessary." Then, when the Jamestown brides enlisted, a similar request was made to set aside a parcel of land for them as well.

Providing female colonists with free land was a substantial immigration incentive, but it was actually the generous property and inheritance laws that offered women the greatest benefit. Because malaria, dysentery, and influenza were widespread in colonial Virginia, early death was also common. This meant that most marriages were short, but the morbid upside was that colonial law and practice ensured widowed women were uncommonly well provided for. In England, widows were

only required by law to receive one-third of their deceased husband's estate. In Virginia, widows almost always inherited more than that. Among other things, this meant that colonial widows didn't feel economic pressure to remarry after their husband's death, and many chose to remain single.

Independent wealth also allowed colonial women to exert an unusual degree of control over their lives, particularly their marital decisions. In one well-known story, a Virginia woman named Sarah Harrison is recorded as refusing to go along with a crucial portion of the marriage ceremony. According to witnesses, when the clergyman asked for her promise to "obey," Harrison answered, "No obey." When the question was repeated, she gave the same response. After the third refusal, the reverend acquiesced to her demand and performed the ceremony with no mention of the promise to obey.

Harrison's marriage is also remarkable because only a short time earlier, she had been engaged to another man. Harrison had even signed a contract promising to marry her first fiancé, and breaching a marriage contract was serious matter under English law at the time. Nevertheless, Harrison received no punishment.

In fact, she was one of many Virginian women who jilted their former fiancés. The most famous of these women was Cicely Jordan. In 1623, Jordan's husband died. A few days later, she agreed to marry Reverend Greville Pooley. Jordan knew that such a quick engagement was scandalous, so she asked Pooley to keep it a secret. He didn't, and, not surprisingly, Jordan dumped him. Pooley then sued Jordan for breach of promise. Based on his actions, Pooley seems like a horrid marriage prospect, but under the law at that time, his suit had merit, and he would have been expected to win, as Jordan had clearly breached her promise. Nevertheless, the Virginia government refused to punish her. Despite the law on the books, colonial women like Jordan were often exempted from the legal restrictions that controlled the lives and marital choices of their counterparts in England. For women considering marital immigration, this freedom may have been the greatest immigration incentive of all.

Like most Americans, the Jamestown brides came in search of a better life. It may seem surprising that an institution as derided and ridiculed as mail-order marriage could serve this role, but for the Jamestown brides, and the many women who came after them, marital immigration could be both empowering and liberating. Although most modern mail-order brides no longer receive trousseaus of clothing and linens, marital immigration can still provide a path to greater equality and opportunity. This was true in the 17th century, and it remains true today.

Related Video

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARCIA ZUG is an associate professor of law at the University of South Carolina. She is the author of *Buying a Bride: An Engaging History of Mail-Order Matches*.
