A Role for Sassafras in the Search for the Lost Colony

Written by Philip S. McMullan Jr.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1587, Sir Walter Raleigh\(^1\) sent his second attempted English colony to the New World under Governor John White. Although ordered to Chesapeake Bay, the colonists were rudely deposited on Roanoke Island. Needing supplies and further instructions, Governor White returned to England. Because England was preparing to battle the Spanish Armada, Queen Elizabeth would not allow White’s relief ships to sail. When White finally gained passage to Roanoke on a privateer in 1590, he found the settlement abandoned. White asked the captain to sail to Croatan Island where he expected to find news of the colony, but he was foiled again. Before reaching Croatan Island, the ship was badly damaged in a strong nor’easter; and the captain sailed to England instead. White had spent one day searching on Roanoke Island and never returned. Later searches from Jamestown were no more successful. The fate of the 116 men, women, and children has become one of history’s most intriguing mysteries.\(^2\) What happened to these 116 colonists? Had they not, as David Beers Quinn suggests, somehow dispersed themselves among the Indian population? Until ongoing archaeological research can uncover new physical clues, historical research may shed some

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light on the mystery. This essay will examine the available clues and introduce an interesting new clue, a sassafras tree drawn on a 1650 map by John Ferrar.\textsuperscript{3}

II. EVIDENCE FROM THE EXPLORERS

A. John White’s Map – The most important map for historical research about the Lost Colony is John White’s 1585 map of Raleigh’s ‘Virginia.’ Fig. 1 is the northeastern North Carolina portion of White’s map. Fig. 2 is a recent satellite photograph of the same region. The region shown is from the present day Virginia state line south to Cape Lookout and from approximately 50 miles east of Raleigh, NC to Cape Hatteras. A comparison of the two demonstrates the impressive accuracy of White’s sixteenth century drawing.

Indian villages that are important to the story are printed in red. Some years after 1585, the inlet at Cape Hatteras closed. (See “A” in Fig. 1.) Croatan and Hatteras became a single Island. The Outer Banks moved westward, rounding the false cape (“B”) that is often mistaken for Cape Hatteras. Also, all of the inlets north of Roanoke Island (“C”) are now

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closed. Finally, the island at “D” in the Albemarle Sound, later named Batts Island, is now completely under water, showing that the water level has risen measurably since 1587.

**B. The Ralegh Voyages** – John White’s first map was sketched while he was in ‘Virginia’ with Ralegh’s expedition of 1585-1586, one of the voyages described below. The voyages of exploration and colonization sent out by Sir Walter Ralegh from 1584 to 1590 were the first attempts to settle English men, women, and children on any part of North America.\(^5\) Despite Ralegh’s intentions for the 1587 colony to settle on Chesapeake Bay where Jamestown was seated in 1607, all of Ralegh’s attempts at settlement were in the region (Northeastern North Carolina) shown on White’s map in Fig. 1. A review of the Ralegh voyages will set the stage for examining the few available clues to the Lost Colony’s disappearance.

**1584** - On March 25, 1584, Sir Walter Ralegh received a ‘letters-patent’ from Queen Elizabeth “for the discovering and planting of new lands not possessed by any Christian Prince nor inhabited by Christian People…to continue for the space of 6 yeeres and no more.”\(^6\) Ralegh first expedition was a short reconnaissance voyage between April and September, 1584, by Amadas and Barlowe, Two Indians, a Croatoan called Manteo and a Roanoke called Wanchese, came back to England with them.\(^7\) They returned with glowing

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\(^7\) “Arthur Barlowe’s Narrative of the 1584 Voyage,” In: Quinn, *The First Colonists*, op. cit. pp 1-12
reports about the New World (including sweet smelling sassafras.)

England’s Virgin Queen Elizabeth then allowed Ralegh to name his patented land ‘Virginia’ in her honor.

1585 - After attacking Spanish ships in the Caribbean, Ralegh’s second expedition under Sir Richard Grenville reached ‘Virginia’ in July 1585. Grenville explored the Pamlico Sound while his crew freed the Tiger, which had run aground in Ocracoke Inlet. His men spread deadly smallpox among the initially friendly Algonquin Indian, and Grenville ordered an Indian village destroyed when a silver cup was stolen from him. With enemies thus established along the Pamlico Sound, Grenville left Governor Ralph Lane and his 100-man garrison at their new fort on Roanoke Island. Lane’s expedition remained in ‘Virginia’ from July 1585 to June 1586, exploring the Albemarle Sound and its tributaries. They searched for gold, silver, commercial commodities, and a deepwater port -- demanding food from the natives wherever they explored.

Ralegh sent John White and Thomas Harriot with Lane’s colony to record the natural environment and map the region. John White was an accomplished artist and draftsman. “Explorer, navigation expert, mathematician, scientist and astronomer Thomas Harriot” had learned the Algonquian language from Manteo and Wanchese. Harriot’s report, (which includes sassafras), and White’s drawings were critical intelligence for subsequent English settlements, including those at Jamestown and New England.

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8 “On the 2d of July, 1584, Captains Amadas and Barlow, as they approached the coast of the modern North Carolina, but before it had been sighted, detected ‘a smel so sweet and so strong as if we had bene in the midst of some delicate garden abounding with all kinds of odoriferous flowers, by which they were assured that the land could not be farre distant.’ (Hakluyt’s Voyages, p. 301.) This came from the Indians setting fires at this time of year to the woods and thickets, in order to hunt, and the land is full of sweet smelling herbs as sassafras, which has a sweet smell. When the wind blows out of the north west, and the smoke too is driven to sea, it happens that the land is smelt before it is seen.” Bruce, Philip A. Economic History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century. New York: MacMillan and Co., 1896.


1586 - The supplies lost on Grenville’s grounded ship at the beginning of their stay had been a severe blow to Lane’s expedition. They soon depended on the Roanoke Indians, with whom they shared an Island, for much of their food. The situation became critical when Granganimo, a Roanoke weroance (chief) who had been the colonists’ protector, died before the first corn harvest. His brother Wingina moved the Roanoke Indians from their island to Dasemonkepuec on the mainland (now Mann’s Harbor) in order to avoid Lane and his constant demands for food. Lane soon suspected an ambush by Wingina and his allies, and he launched a preemptive attack on Dasemonkepuec, killing Wingina.\textsuperscript{11} The Roanoke Indians, and possibly their allies on the north shore of the Albemarle Sound, thus become bitter enemies of the English before the 1587 colony arrive.

Sir Francis Drake arrived at Roanoke Island unexpectedly in June 1586. Although he intended to leave supplies and a small ship for Lane, Drake’s fleet was severely damaged by a sudden hurricane. Lane and his colony then decided to leave Roanoke Island with Drake. In late June 1586 a supply ship arrived at Roanoke Island; and, finding the fort deserted, returned to England. In July or August 1586, Grenville returned, found the fort abandoned, and left 15 men so that Ralegh’s patent would be sustained.

The 1584-1586 voyages taught Ralegh that English ships could not sail through the Outer Banks and that the Atlantic roadstead was hazardous.\textsuperscript{12} On his return to England, Lane wrote about a deep water harbor in Chesapeake Bay from which English privateers could easily prey on ships carrying gold and silver to Spain.\textsuperscript{13} He also wrote about sassafras.

\textsuperscript{11} “Ralph Lane’s Narrative of the Settlement of Roanoke Island 1585-1586” In: David and Allison Quinn, 24-45.
\textsuperscript{12} The Atlantic Ocean coast between Virginia and South Carolina became know later as “The Graveyard of the Atlantic.”
\textsuperscript{13} David and Allison Quinn 24-45
1587—Harriot and White had convinced Ralegh that “Virginia” was ready for a planter colony of men, women, and children that would supplement a military garrison. Ralegh appointed John White governor with 13 assistants; and his three ships left Plymouth, England, on May 8, 1587. The 115 colonists included 17 women, and 11 children. Eleanor, White’s pregnant daughter, was one of the women. Manteo had gone back with Lane’s colonist to England and returned with White.

Ralegh instructed White to settle the colony on Chesapeake Bay, but it was not to be. While on the voyage, White lost many arguments with Simon Ferdinando, the chief pilot. Most of the arguments involved Ferdinando’s failure to take the ships to those Caribbean Islands where White could obtain livestock, salt, and seedlings that the colony would need in ‘Virginia’. When they arrived at Roanoke Island on July 22nd, Ferdinando would take them no farther. He said he would seek Spanish prizes before returning to England, and White could not summon the authority to stop him.14

White had planned a short visit on Roanoke Island to learn of the Indian situation from the 15 men left by Grenville. He found two bodies at the fort, and then one of his own assistants was ambushed and murdered. Manteo accompanied White to Croatan Island where they asked Manteo’s mother about the 15 men. She told them that the men had been ambushed by Roanoke Indians and that thirteen had escaped on a small boat and were not heard from again. Manteo’s mother also warned White that the region’s Indians had little food because of a drought, and she begged him not to take their small supply of corn. White asked for her help to summons the other Indians in the region for a peace council, but only

14 Lee Miller offers several clues that suggest Ferdinando was working with those who wished Ralegh to fail. Jamestown backers acquired his letters-patent to Virginia after he was thrown into the Tower of London. Lee Miller, Roanoke: Solving the Mystery of the Lost Colony, New York: Arcade, 2001.
the Croatoan responded to his summons. White decided that he must revenge the dead Englishmen by attacking the Roanoke Indians at their village at Dasemonkepuec. When his men attacked at dawn, they shot several before realizing that the Indians were Croatoan and not Roanoke. The Croatoan explained that they had come to harvest the crops left behind by the Roanoke, who had crossed over to the north shore of the Albemarle. Soon after the incident, White declared Manteo King of Dasemonkepuec and Roanoke, thus providing the first clue that the Croatoan had replaced the Roanoke Indians on the mainland west of Roanoke Island.

Short of food and expecting little help from the Croatoan, White and his assistants decided that someone would have to return to England for help. The assistants prevailed upon a reluctant John White to return. They explained that they would move 50 miles into the mainland while he was gone. They would leave a sign in code to tell him where they were and if they were in danger. White stayed for the birth and christening of his granddaughter Virginia Dare, the first English child born in the New World. He left for the Caribbean with Ferdinando on August 27 and did not reach England until November 8, 1587.

1588 - If the colony had not left Roanoke Island by May 1588, Vincent Gonzalez gave them an excellent reason to leave. Gonzalez, a Spanish captain, sailed from Saint Augustine with 30 soldiers and seaman to find the English colony.15 Spies in Queen Elizabeth’s court had told him to search for them on Chesapeake Bay. Failing to find them there, he was sailing back toward Saint Augustine when a nor’easter blew him into an inlet from which he could see evidence of the English settlement. Having but a small force, he departed as soon as the wind permitted. It is likely that English or Indian lookouts at

observation posts had seen the Spanish ship, giving the colonists reason to leave Roanoke Island. However, they would know that the Spanish could not return for many days, so they would not leave a distress message for John White. They did not know that the Spanish Armada was preparing to invade England, and their colony was not an immediately concern for Spain.

1590 –John White’s attempts to provide relief to the colony in 1588 and 1589 were unsuccessful, and he did not return to Roanoke Island until 1590. He stayed on Roanoke Island for a single day, searching for the colonist or signs of their location. Unfortunately, he never reached Croatan Island to inquire there about the location of the colonists. In his narrative of that 1590 visit,16 White gave these clues to their intended destination:

1. **They went with the Croatoan** - White saw the letters CRO carved on a tree: “which letters presently we knew to signify the place, where I should find the planters seated, according to a secret token agreed on between them and me” 17

2. **They were not in immediate danger** - He then entered the palisade of trees enclosing the houses of the colonists where he found CROATOAN without a cross carved on a post at the entrance to the fort. “I willed them, that if they should happen to be distressed in any of those places that then they should carve over the letters or name a Cross \* in this forme, but we found no such signe of distresse.” 18

3. **They intended to move 50 miles inland** – About his reluctance to leave in 1587, White wrote: “Also, [I] alleaged, that seing they intended to remove 50 miles further up into the maine, presently [I] being then absent, [my] stuffe and goods, might be both spoiled, and most of it pilfered away...”19 About his 1590 return, he wrote: “…for at my comming away they were prepared to remove from Roanoke 50 miles into the maine.”20

16 “John White’s Narrative of the 1590 Voyage In: David and Allison Quinn, 117-130
17 David and Allison Quinn 125
18 David and Allison Quinn 126 White indicates a cross pattée, such as is often found on the crown of English monarchs.
19 David and Allison Quinn 103
20 David and Allison Quinn 126
III. LOST COLONY THEORIES

A. Introduction - Where did they go? Many theories about their fate have been proposed. They were washed away by a hurricane, massacred by the Indians, built ships and drowned at sea, moved to Cedar Island, and/or became the Lumbee Indians. These theories fail to be consistent with the available evidence.

John White did not know exactly where the colonist had gone, but he had expected to learn their location from the Croatoan Indians. If he had reached the Croatoan village, it is likely that he would have found news of them. However, it is unlikely that the entire colony was there. Croatan Island’s sandy soils and salt spray preclude growing sufficient crops for such a large colony. Also, its position was too exposed to discovery by the Spaniards, and it was not “50 miles into the maine.”

B. White-de Brey Map – Before examining a few more promising theories, the geography of the region will be presented again using a version of John White’s map published by Theodore deBry in 1590. Figure 3 shows a version of White’s map published by Theodore de Bry as the centerfold of his 1590 edition of Thomas Harriot’s A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia.\(^\text{21}\) This version was often incorporated in later maps, including the Farrer map that will be discussed later. Note that de Bry has rotated White’s 1587 map 90 degrees to the right. This has placed Chesapeake Bay (north) on the right side of the map rather than at the top. Most of the Indian villages that have been theorized as the destination of the colonists are shown in red on Fig. 3.

\(^{21}\) Harriot 42-43 (centerfold)
Figure 3 - *The John White/Theodore de Bry 1590 Map of Virginia*

C. Competing Theories– William Strachey of the Jamestown colony believed that the colonist settled with the Chesepic Indians near Chesapeake Bay, and all were massacred in 1607 as Powhatan had claimed.\(^{22}\) David Beers Quinn preferred this theory, but he noted that Strachey was an investor in the Virginia Company and wanted to remove any further claim Ralegh might have to ‘Virginia.’ Quinn also said no sixteenth century English artifacts have been uncovered by archaeologists at any Chesepic Indian Village.\(^ {23}\) Another problem with the Strachey/Quinn theory is that Ralph Lane placed the distance from Roanoke Island


\(^{23}\) Quinn 344-378
to the Chesepioc Village at 130 miles, not 50 miles.\textsuperscript{24} Lane also claimed that the Chesepians were allies of the Roanoke for their planned ambush.\textsuperscript{25}

In \textit{Roanoke: Solving the Mystery of the Lost Colony} Lee Miller theorized that the colonist went up the Chowan River and joined the Chawonoac Indians (Fig. 3.) She said that they were eventually attacked and enslaved by the Mandoag (Tuscarora).\textsuperscript{26} Her theory also fails to comport with all the available evidence. The Chawonoac Indian village on the Chowan River is 150 miles from Roanoke Island by water, and the ‘leages’ scale on the White-deBry map shows White knew this. Lane’s statement that the Chawonoac were allied with the ‘Roanoak’ presents another problem.\textsuperscript{27}

Surveyor John Lawson talked to the Croatoan [\textit{later called Hatteras}] Indians near Cape Hatteras before writing the following in his 1709 publication, \textit{A New Voyage to Carolina}:\textsuperscript{28}

“A farther Confirmation of this we have from the Hatteras Indians, who either then lived on Roanoak-Island, or much frequented it. These tell us that several of their Ancestors were white People, and could talk in a Book [\textit{read}], as we do. The Truth of which is confirmed by gray Eyes being found frequently amongst these Indians, and no others. They value themselves extremely for their Affinity to the English, and are ready to do them all friendly offices. It is probable, that this Settlement [\textit{the Lost Colony}] miscarry’d for want of timely Supplies from England; or thro’ the Treachery of the Natives, for we may reasonably suppose that the English were forced to cohabit with them, for Relief and Conversation; and that in process of Time, they conform’d themselves to the Manners of their Indian Relations. And thus we see, how apt Humne Nature is to degenerate.”

\textsuperscript{24} David and Allison Quinn
\textsuperscript{25} David and Allison Quinn
\textsuperscript{27} David and Allison Quinn
D. The Center’s Theory - The Lost Colony Center for Science and Research (The Center) has proposed a theory that more closely satisfies the available evidence from John White and John Lawson. The Center is a non-profit organization formed by its Director, Mr. Fred Willard, to continue the archaeological and historical research begun by the Croatan Group. In 1994, the Croatan Group initiated an archaeological project in Buxton near Cape Hatteras. The group used John White’s map to locate one of three Croatoan villages on the island. Guided by Dr. David Phelps, retired East Carolina University archaeologist, the Croatan Group uncovered a number of sixteen century English and Indian artifacts. The most significant find was a signet ring with a Kendall crest, the lion insigne shown in Fig. 4. Two men named Kendall were with the Lost Colony expedition.

![Kendall Signet Ring](image)

Fig. 4 - Kendall Signet Ring

The Center’s theory is that the main body of colonists followed the Croatoan Indians to the Alligator River, cohabitated with them in their several villages, and remained with

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them for many generations while avoiding discovery. Figure 5 presents the trail that the Center believes the Croatan traveled between 1587 and the present time. The migration before 1600 is shown in red, and the more gradual migration over 200 years is shown in blue. The Center’s web site, www.lost-colony.com, contains supporting genealogical and historical data for the latter migration. The early migration began at three villages on Croatan Island, where some Croatoan Indians continued to live after the migration began. The Croatoan first occupied Dasemonkepeuc (Manns Harbor) after the Roanoke Indians abandoned it.

Figure 5 – Migration Trail of the Croatoan on 1809 Price-Strothers Map

The Croatoan may have led the colonists away soon after Vincent Gonzalez’ ship was sighted, and some may have left soon after White departed. They may have traveled

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30 Fred Willard, Migration Patterns of Coastal N.C. Indians. Greenville: East Carolina University Honors Program, undated. <http://www.lost-colony.com/research.html> The Croatoan descendents are organized and will soon finance DNA studies that will demonstrate their link to the 1587 Indians at Croatan Island.
north to the Albemarle Sound, west to the Alligator River, then south to several Indian villages\textsuperscript{31} along the Alligator River, a distance of 50 miles by water into the mainland.

Because the group was too large to be placed in a single village during a period of drought, it is more likely that the colonists were distributed among the four Alligator River villages identified in Fig. 5. Some colonists are likely to have remained on Croatan Island to watch for John White’s return and to warn of approaching Spanish ships. McMullan has hypothesized that the married colonists soon separated a short distance from the Indians and the unmarried Englishmen. He has provided archaeological and oral history evidence of a settlement at Beechland (Fig. 5) that continued for hundreds of years until anthrax forced the settlers to leave in the 1840s. His thesis is developed in “Searching for the Lost Colony at Beechland” on the Center’s web site www.lost-colony.com\textsuperscript{32}

While preparing his Beechland paper, McMullan learned that the mainland between the Alligator River and Roanoke Island has been labeled ‘Croatan’ on every important historical map drawn after Manteo was made King of Dasemonkepeuc. Lawson’s statement that the Indians, “either then lived on Roanoak-Island, or much frequented it,” helps supports the contention that the Croatoan had continued to control the mainland that is now Dare County long after Manteo was made King of Dasemonkepeuc. McMullan has also explained that the land around the Alligator includes several large sandy ridges that contain highly productive forest and crop land. He demonstrated that the mainland is not a large swamp, as it is so often portrayed on both ancient and recent maps; and it could easily sustain a group as large as the colony.

\textsuperscript{31} Indian villages were identified by John White on his map, and Satellite images provided by Elizabeth City State University’s Geosciences Department have pinned down the locations of the villages.

If the colonists migrated with the Croatoan as the Center has theorized, there should be archeology evidence of English colonists at the sites of these villages. The archaeological research at Buxton, which found evidence of Croatan-English cohabitation, can provide examples of the items that should be found. New archaeological investigations at the three Croatoan villages on Hatteras Island will begin in 2006, and villages on the western migration trail will be investigated as funds become available.

![Figure 6 - John Farrer's 1650 “A mapp of Virginia discovered to ye Hill”](image)

**E. The John Farrer Map** - An additional clue concerning Tramasquecoock was uncovered by Center Director Fred Willard in 2005 while reviewing the Farrer map in Fig. 6. John Farrer or Ferrar (1590-1657) was a member of the Royal Council of the Virginia Company and deputy treasurer of the company from 1619 to 1622. In his map of ‘Virginia,’

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Farrer located the Pacific Ocean just beyond the Alleghany Mountains. He was more accurate when drawing present day Virginia and North Carolina because he had maps by John White and John Smith of Jamestown to incorporate. Farrer’s map of North America and his description of ‘Virginia” were incorporated in Edward Williams’ 1650 publication *Virgo Triumphans.*

Farrer’s map was of little interest to the author until Director Fred Willard notice a sassafras tree on Farrer’s map beside the Alligator River and brought it to the author’s attention.

Figure 7 is a Carolina segment of the Farrer map that shows a sassafras tree at the lower end of the Alligator River. The tree is located approximately where John White had placed Tramasquecock on his map. The Farrer map contains many other trees, but the sassafras tree is the only one with this shape and identified by name. Why did he pay special attention to this tree at this location? Why was sassafras important to him? This essay will seek the answer as it continues.

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34 Edward Williams and John Farrer, *Virgo Triumphans:* or, Virginia richly and truly valued, but the south part therof in particular including the fertile Carolana, and the no lesse excellent island of Roanoak, richly and experimentally valued: humbly presented as the auspice of a beginning yeare, to the Parliament of England, and councell of state, London: Printed by Thomas Harper, for John Stephenson, and are to be sold at his shop, 1650.

35 The author is a board member and research associate with this Lost Colony Center.
IV. THE HISTORY OF SASSAFRAS

A small tree, Sassafras officinale (N.O. Laurine?), also called Sassafras Laurel and Ague-tree, with green apetalous flowers and dimorphous leaves, native in North America, where it is said to have been discovered by the Spaniards in 1528. (Oxford English Dict.)

A. Introduction - Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, Sassafras was a major export from the Americas to Europe. Found from Canada to Mexico and Brazil, sassafras trees were believed to have near-miraculous healing powers. Although no longer approved for medicinal use, sassafras was once a cure for almost everything. The following shows that a surprising number and variety of uses of sassafras were recorded in Rafinesque's 1830 Medical Flora:36

“[Sassafras is used] in opthalmia, dysentery, gravel, catarrh...as stimulant, antispasmodic, sudorific, and depurative...in rheumatism, cutaneous diseases, secondary syphilis, typhus fevers...to purge...the body in the spring...for purification of the blood...leaves to make glutinous gombos...buds to flavor beers and spirits...useful in scurvy, cachexy, flatulence. bark ... smoked like tobacco. Bowls made of the wood, drives bugs and moths.”

Sassafras became a highly valued export commodity in the seventeenth century. The following paragraphs trace the history of sassafras, show how Sir Walter Ralegh and the English settlers became involved with it, and explain why someone with knowledge of a large stand of sassafras trees might try to keep the knowledge secret.

B. The French Pox – Alfred Cosby believes Christopher Columbus carried smallpox

to America in 1492 and brought back the ‘French pox.’ The disease was named syphilis by Doctor Girolamo Fracastoro in his poem of 1531. Syphilis spread through Europe in the sixteenth century much as AIDS has spread in the twentieth century. Because the disease was associated with sexual activity, syphilis undoubtedly played a major role in the increased sexual regulation of the sixteenth century. Kings and Princes closed brothels and public bathhouses. The afflicted would beg for any cure that physicians, quacks, and mystic healers might provide. “The story goes that the physician Thierry de Hery once knelt before a statute of Charles VIII, explaining that ‘Charles is a good enough saint for me. He put 30,000 francs in my pocket when he brought the pox to France.’”

Mercury in ointment and oral form was the most popular syphilis remedy in the sixteenth century. Despite severe side effects, it was considered the most effective treatment for 400 years until penicillin arrived. “Mercury was overused, and in many cases the cure was successful but the patient died.” The next most popular treatment for syphilis was an elixir from guaiacum, a wood product from the West Indies imported in the 1520s. Guaiacum elixir was reputed to cure gout, stones, palsy, dropsy, and many other diseases; but only the wealthy could afford the full price. Counterfeit guaiacum soon reached the market. Guaiacum’s reputation fell precipitously in the 1530s, leaving toxic mercury as the only alternative. Europe was ripe for a new cure.

C. Sassafras Discovered— In 1535, French explorer Jacques Cartier may have

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39 Crosby 156
40 Crosby 153
41 Crosby 154-155
brought from Canada the first report that sassafras could cure diseases. The Canadian Indians
told him that a brew from the bark of the annedda tree, later thought to be a sassafras tree,
would cure his crewmen of scurvy. Cartier gave the brew to his sick crew and they felt
immediate relief, recovering fully after three or four drinks of the brew. “They showed us
that the bark and the leaves must be pounded and then boiled in water; that water must then
be drunk one day in two, and the residue placed on the sick and swollen legs; and they told us
that this tree cured all disease.”\textsuperscript{42} No samples were brought back to Europe. Since there were
no sassafras trees in Europe, the report was of little use at the time.

![Monardes Drawing of a Sassafras Tree](image)

**Figure 8 - Monardes Drawing of a Sassafras Tree**

A 1574 treatise by Dr. Nicolas Monardes is the best known surviving description of
the early history and medical uses of sassafras.\textsuperscript{43} Monardes, a distinguished Spanish
physician, wrote that sassafras possessed almost magical properties. He extolled its curative
virtue and gave detailed accounts of its wonderful healing powers. In his treatise, Monardes

\textsuperscript{42} Jacques Cartier, *Bref Récit et Succinte Narration*, trans. Jean L. Launay,  IacquesCartier et "La Grosse

\textsuperscript{43} Nicolas Monardes, *Joyfull newes out of the new-found worlde*. London: E. Allde, 1596. A translation of the
1574 treatise from Spanish into English by John Frampton, a merchant who spent most of his life in Spain.
has the drawing of a sassafras tree in Fig. 8. Its resemblance to the sassafras tree in Fig. 7 suggests that Farrer read the English translation of Mondardes treatise.  

Monardes explained how sassafras first reached Europe. In 1564, French Huguenots settled Fort Caroline on the St. Johns River in Florida. Spanish King Philip II sent Pedro Menendez de Aviles to destroy the "heretical" Frenchmen. Before Menendez’ attacked and killed most of the Frenchmen, Indians had introduced the Huguenots to sassafras roots as a remedy for many diseases. When Spanish soldiers became ill, a French survivor told them of the Indian cure. “They digged up the roote of this tree, and tooks a piece thereof… cutte it small into very thin and little pceces, and cast [as much as needed] into water.” The pieces were left in the water until they took on a good color. The patient then drank the liquid at breakfast, dinner, and supper with little concern for the quantity consumed. The Frenchman said the treatment healed many diseases.

The cured Spanish soldiers returned from Florida in good health, bringing pieces of sassafras with them. They swore to Monardes that sassafras had kept them healthy. He was impressed by the health of these men, because so many who had returned from America were sickly. Monardes experimented with the wood samples that the soldiers gave him and found them effective and safe, if not abused by excessive use. It was not long before sassafras elixirs had been tried on many diseases. Its apparent effectiveness for syphilis made it a desirable commodity. It was only available in the New World, and the early shiploads of the commodity brought wealth to the importers.

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44 The illustration given by Monardes of the sassafras tree has been widely copied in the herbals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, among which we name Dalechamps (1586), Joh. Bauhinus (Bauhin, (1650), and Piso, (1658), the latter giving it the Brazilian synonym anhuiba.” John U. Lloyd, History of the Vegetable Drugs of the U.S.P.: Sassafras, 1991. 15 Apr. 2006 <http://www.henriettesherbal.com/eclectic/lloyd-hist/sassafras.html>.

45 Monardes (n.p.)
V. SASSAFRAS AND THE ENGLISH SETTLERS

A. The Ralegh Explorers – Richard Hakluyt collected narratives of every voyage he could find in *The Principal Navigations*. Hakluyt’s narratives were a primary resource for the English explorers as they made plans to colonize the New World. Sassafras was noted in narratives of the voyage of Cartier, of Armadas and Barlowe, of Ralph Lane (“great woods of Sassafras”) and of Thomas Harriot. In his *Brieve and True Report* of his experiences in the New World, Harriot reported that the Indians used sassafras as an herbal medicine, and he referred to Monardus as the best source for information about sassafras:

> “Sassafras, called by the inhabitants Winauk, a kinde of wood of most pleasant and sweete smel; and of most rare vertues in phisick for the cure of many diseases. It is found by experience to bee farre better and of more uses then the wood which is called Guaiacum, or Lignu vitae. For the description of using and the manifolde vertues thereof, I referre you to the book of Monardus, translated and entituled in English, *The ioyfull newes from the West Indies.*”

Harriot said little about sassafras because did not want to draw the reader’s attention to it. Elsewhere in his *Brieve and True Report*, he said that ‘Virginia’ held two

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secret commodities of great commercial value, one of certain availability and the other that he hoped to find in quantity.  

“I might have said more; as of the particular places where they are founde and best to be planted and prepared...but because others then welwillers might be therewithal acquainted, not to the good of action, I have wittingly omitted them: knowing that to those that are well disposed I have uttered, according to my promise and purpose for this part sufficient.”

Ralegh held a Royal monopoly on all commodities shipped from ‘Virginia,’ and Harriot wished to protect the monopoly. He did not care to draw the attention of unscrupulous fortune-hunters to the two secret commodities, but the name of these commodities would surely be written somewhere. In the introduction to the Dover edition of Harriot’s Report, Editor Paul Hulton states: “Of Harriot’s ‘Chronicle,’ which we know he compiled during his time with the colony, nothing remains but an abstract—the Report. Harriot states his intention in the Report to publish this natural history material but, for reasons which are not clear, none of it was included in the De Bry folio.” Quinn also commented; “It would appear that Harriot’s report on the resources of Virginia was ready in February 1587 but was held back.”

The full chronicle may have contained the answer to the secret commodities, but we can only speculate what they may be. Harriot’s emphasis in his Brief Report on “Silke of grass” suggests this is the commodity he hoped they would find in quantity. The known commercial importance of sassafras suggests it was the commodity of great value. If Harriot had found a major stand of sassafras trees at Tramasquecoock during his explorations with John White and Ralph Lane, that secret would be worth keeping until Ralegh could successfully plant a new colony in ‘Virginia” to harvest such a valuable commodity. Unfortunately, a new colony was never established.

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50 Harriot 12
51 David and Allison Quinn xiii
B. Ralegh’s Sassafras Marketing – The early colonial history of sassafras trading and Sir Walter Ralegh’s involvement was reported by David L. Cowen in a 2004 article: “Boom and Bust: Sassafras” in *Apothecary’s Cabinet.*  

“The search for, cultivation of, and trade in drugs must take their place among the economic motives behind the building of the British empire in America. Sassafras was one of the most important drugs involved in this process of empire building. Sassafras attained a phenomenal repute.”

Sir Walter Ralegh owned the English Royal patent for ‘Virginia’. ‘Virginia’ included from the Carolinas to Newfoundland, and then westward to the Pacific Ocean. When he could no longer gather the finances to send out a voyage of his own, Ralegh gave charters to merchants and ship owners who would establish a settlement or at least bring back valuable commodities. In 1602 Ralegh chartered Samuel Mace to look for the colonists and to gather sassafras and other valuable goods for sale in England. Mace did not find the colonists, but he returned with sassafras. As Cowen reports:“Sir Walter Raleigh became active in its trade and obtained a monopoly in it. Sir Walter was selling sassafras for £1,000 to £2,000 a ton and he estimated his return as from 800% to 1,000%. In one voyage in 1602 he made enough to outfit two more ships, and he fought, unsuccessfully apparently, to stop incursions on his patent.”

Captain Bartholomew Gosnold proved that Harriot had reason to be concerned about “others then wellwillers.” Gosnold also sailed to ‘Virginia’ (New England) in 1602, but

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54 Cowen 9
without Raleigh’s knowledge. He brought back a cargo of sassafras and cedar wood. From the following report by Karle Schlieff we learn how Raleigh reacted to this news:  

“Raleigh becomes aware of the Gosnold voyage when he is in Weymouth to meet a returning ship...Gosnold has his share sent to Dartmouth and London...Gilbert’s share of the cargo is seized. Raleigh’s letter...asks that...the Judge...issue a warrant for seizure of Gosnold’s...cargo. Raleigh complains that the sassafras market (sarsephraze) is about to plummet from 10 to 20 shillings to 8 to 10 shillings per pound. Other sources claim that sassafras was only 3 to 8 shillings...per pound on the market. This raises the question of whether or not the sassafras market was indeed in trouble or just Raleigh’s self promotion.”

Gosnold later settled in Jamestown, and a skeleton that is believed to be his was recently uncovered there by archaeologists. Gosnold and his officers escaped greater punishment when John M. Brereton, an officer on his ship agreed to write an upbeat narrative of the voyage to encourage other explorers to sail under a charter from Raleigh. Captain Martin Pring was inspired by John Brereton’s narrative. “Pring’s backers focused primarily on the valuable sassafras Gosnold had discovered; but, unlike Gosnold, they first secured Sir Walter Raleigh’s permission prior to undertaking their venture.” Pring’s expedition left England on April 10, 1603 in the Speedwell and Discoverer, which sailed home first with a boatload of sassafras. Raleigh lost his charter to the Virginia Company of London in 1606 and was imprisoned in the Tower of London.

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C. Sassafras and Jamestown - Sassafras was the first article to be furnished by Virginia to the mother country, and between 1616 and 1619, sassafras and tobacco were the only commodities shipped from Virginia. Philip Bruce wrote in 1896 that: 59

“The sassafras was as frequently observed in Virginia three hundred years ago as it is today; so plentiful was it on Jamestown Island and in the country adjacent, that the attention of the earliest colonists was directed to securing it, to the neglect of their cornfields. At a later period, it was associated with tobacco as one of the two commodities from Virginia offered in large quantities for sale in London.”

Cowen stated that, “The colony of Jamestown almost floundered because seamen, and perhaps the colonists themselves, stampeded into what must be called a sassafras rush. Their eagerness for sassafras, it was reported, reacted to the ‘prejudice’ of the colony.” 60

On June 22, 1610, the Jamestown Council, concerned with sassafras theft and its effect on prices, wrote the following to the Virginia Company in London: 61

“The easiest and richest commodity being sassafras rootes were gathered upp by the sailors…we earnestlie entreat you (and doe trusts) that you take order as we be not thus defrauded…that they be reasonablie dealt withall so as all losse, neither fall on us nor them. I believe they have thereof two townes (tons?) …will pull down our price for a long time, this we leave to your wisdomes.”

The Calendars of State Papers of the Public Record Office in London has instruction for things to be sent from ‘Virginia’, which stated: “Small Sassafras Rootes…is worthe 50£ and better, p. Tonne,” 62 The price of 50£ per ton for sassafras had fallen drastically since Ralegh receive £1,000 to £2,000 a ton in 1602; and, as Cowen reported, the price continued to drop. 63

59 Bruce, Philip A. Title: Economic History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century: New York: MacMillan and Co., 1896 Subdivision: Chapter II
60 Cowen 9
61 James J. McDonald, Life in Old Virginia, Norfolk, Va.: The Old Virginia Publishing Company, Inc. 1907.
63 Cowen 9
“But the bubble had burst. In 1620, Sir Edwyn Sandys, head of the Virginia Company, reported that sassafras was worth very little and recommended that its production be curtailed. Its medical reputation persisted, however, and it continued to be exported from the American colonies throughout the colonial period. In 1770 alone England imported 76.5 tons of sassafras worth £2,142. This came to £28 per ton, a far cry from Sir Walter’s figures, no matter how the pound may have changed in value.”

The ship Blessing was sent from England to Africa in 1661 with instructions to trade for ‘elephant teeth’ and return them to England. If such tusks were not available, they were to trade for slaves and take them to America. There they were to sail up the Chesapeake to Maryland and “dispose of so many Negros for Tobacco and about tenn tunns of saxafras as will make up your freight…”64 Though no longer so valuable as when Ralegh first imported it, sassafras continued to be a commodity of trade in the New World.

VI. CONCLUSION

If John White had returned in 1588 with additional colonists and supplies, he would have moved the colony to Chesapeake. However, the ships that brought White back to ‘Virginia’ would have expected to return to England with valuable cargo on board. Sassafras was the only known ‘Virginia’ commodity that could provide Ralegh with a high return on his investment, as voyages in 1602 and 1603 later proved. Although sassafras could have been obtained at Jamestown, White and the colonists would not have known that in 1587. It would have been logical for the colonists to relocate where sassafras could be harvested in anticipation of White’s return, and Tramasquecock apparently had sassafras. Farrar had drawn a sassafras tree about where White had drawn Tramasquecock. That village was 50

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miles into the mainland, protected from discovery by the Spanish, and within the territory controlled by the Croatoan or the Mattamuskeet Indians. (The two tribes later became one.)

When John White and Thomas Harriot explored the Albemarle Sound area with Ralph Lane, they would have visited the Alligator River. White’s map specifically identified Tramasquecock village on the Alligator, and Thomas Harriot certainly would have noted the location of such a valuable resource in his chronicle. It is quite likely that Farrer had access to Harriot’s chronicle, which contained much more information than was made public in his Brief Report. Writing about Virgo Trivymphans in which Farrer’s map appeared, William Powell said:65

“The natural products of the country are described in glowing terms, and some 14 pages are devoted to a discussion of the possibilities of raising silkworms. Ralph Lane, Thomas Hariot, John Pory, and Sir William Berkeley are cited among the sources of information.”

By 1650 when Farrer’s map was published, the Virginia Company of London held the monopoly that had previously belonged to Ralegh. Farrer was an active investor and officer in the Virginia Company. The full title of the book that includes Farrer’s map shows a strong interest in attracting investors and settlers to Carolina.66

Virgo Triumphans or, Virginia richly and truly valued, but the south part therof in particular including the fertile Carolana, and the no lesse excellent island of Roanoak, richly and experimentally valued: humbly presented as the auspice of a beginning yeare, to the Parliament of England, and counsell of state.

Farrer may have had access not only to Harriot’s chronicles but to Harriot himself. Farrer and his daughter Virginia tried to introduce silk culture, probably Harriot’s second

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66 Williams and Ferrar 1650
secret commodity, into ‘Virginia.’ Farrer would certainly have been interested in sassafras as well as a commodity for the Virginia Company. However, by 1650 the price of sassafras had dropped dramatically, and sassafras trees had been found from Florida to Canada. Farrer may have drawn the sassafras tree on the Alligator River to record a Carolina asset, but he would not hide this commodity from potential investors. This would explain why Farrer drew the sassafras tree while White and Harriet kept its location hidden.

This essay has not solved the mystery of the Lost Colony, but it should have provided the reader a better understanding of the mystery and what will be required to solve it. The Lost Colony Center for Science and Research has opened an avenue of investigation that has not been attempted before. Essentially, the Center proposes to search for the colonists by following the migration trail of the Croatoan. When the Croatoan villages occupied after 1587 are investigated, researchers should find evidence of English cohabitation in them. This process is moving ahead, beginning with archaeological research at Buxton in the summer of 2006. When the Center’s archaeological research moves to Tramasquecock it will not take long to learn if the sassafras tree has been a useful clue or just a diversion. Until then, the tree will remain an intriguing clue to the destination of the colonists.

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