

Early Colonial Period

The Arrival of Columbus

[Christopher Columbus](#) and three ships - the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Maria* - set sail on August 3, [1492](#). On October 12, a lookout cried out that he had sighted land. The crew set foot on an island that day, naming it San Salvador. It is unknown which exact island was discovered by Columbus. (Note that the island presently called [San Salvador](#) is so-called in honor of Columbus' discovery; it is not necessarily the same one that Columbus set foot on.)

The [Native Americans](#) inhabiting the islands were described as "Indians" by Columbus, who had believed that he had discovered [Asia](#). In reality, he had found an island in the [Caribbean](#). He continued to explore the area, returning to Spain Columbus' misconception that he found Asia was corrected years later by the Italian explorer [Amerigo Vespucci](#), after whom *America* is named.

The Protestant Reformation

In [Europe](#), the power of the [Pope](#) and the influence of [Catholicism](#) was undoubtable. The Catholic religion affected every aspect of politics on the continent. However, in the sixteenth century, the conditions were ripe for reform. [Gutenberg's](#) printing press made the spread of ideas much easier. The influence of [nationalism](#) grew, and rulers began to resent the power possessed by the Pope.

The [Protestant](#) movement may have commenced earlier, but the publication of [Ninety-Five Theses](#) by [Martin Luther](#) in 1517 spurred on the revolution within the Church. Luther attacked the Church's theology, which, he believed, misrepresented The Bible and placed too much authority in the hands of the clergy, and wished to reform the Church. After being excommunicated, Luther published many books on Reform. Luther's works were most influential in Germany and Scandinavia.

Persons other than Luther championed the cause of Reform. In Switzerland, Huldreich Zwingli advanced Protestant ideas, which mostly affected his home country. Similarly, Frenchman John Calvin helped the spread of Protestantism in France and the Netherlands.

Henry VIII and the Church of England

At first, [King Henry VIII of England](#) denounced the Protestant movement. For this, [Pope Leo X](#) granted the title of "Defender of the Faith" to Henry VIII. But, Henry VIII would soon break away from Rome in favor of a separate English or *Anglican* church.

Henry believed strongly that only a man could rule England. He was thus disappointed by his wife, [Catherine of Aragon](#), whose many pregnancies had only one survivor, a Princess named [Mary](#). Through a desire for a male heir and an infatuation with a young lady at court called [Anne Boleyn](#), Henry was able to convince himself that there was divine cause, and that the

marriage was void under the Levitical law of the Old Testament that forbade a man having a relationship with his brother's wife; Catherine was also the widow of Henry's older brother Arthur. Contemporary Ecclesiastic legal interpretation had permitted him to marry Catherine, as the marriage with his brother not consummated. Henry claimed that Catherine must have lied about this to the papacy. In 1527 Henry sent representatives to the Pope on this issue. When the representatives failed to convince the Pope, Henry fought back in domestic matters using Parliament to pass a law that authorized the King, rather than the Pope, to appoint bishops.

In 1532, Parliament passed another law declaring the Archbishop of Canterbury, rather than the Pope, the final authority on marriage law. The King's handpicked Archbishop annulled the royal marriage, causing an angered Pope to excommunicate the King of England. Later, in 1534, Parliament declared Henry "Supreme Governor of the Church of England."

Henry intended the church to be Catholic but separated from Rome, but the independence of the church encouraged protestant influence. During the six-year reign of Henry's son Edward VI, Edward's minority meant the regency was held first in the hands of Edward's uncle Edward Seymour, Duke of Somerset. This was later to be usurped by the unscrupulous Earl of Warwick (subsequently Duke of Northumberland). Consistent with Edward's own sympathies, the acts of both regents consolidated the English Reformation.

After his early death, Edward's Roman Catholic half-sister Mary succeeded in preventing an attempt of a protestant successor, Lady Jane Grey. Posthumously known as the *nine day queen* the uncrowned Jane was a weak claimant to the throne and was, even in Mary's eyes, an innocent political pawn whose resulting execution was seen by Mary as a tragic but necessary means of preventing any rising in her name. When crowned, Mary's attempt to revert the country back to Rome was marked by bloody persecutions that only raised more sympathy for protestantism. This only added strength to the Church of England when it was re-established in [1558](#) under [Elizabeth I](#).

Elizabethan England

[Elizabeth](#) was the daughter of Henry's second wife out of six, Anne Boleyn (whom he had executed). Her ascendancy to the throne only resulted when there was no issue from either of her half siblings, Edward and Mary. The Elizabethan Age brought stability to English government after the reigns of Henry, Edward, and Mary. When Elizabeth returned England to Protestantism, several religious laws were established that were essentially the opposite of Mary's laws: the Catholics were now persecuted while the Anglican Protestants enjoyed more rights.

Queen Elizabeth was a very popular monarch Her people followed her in war and peace. She remained unmarried until her death, probably through a reluctance to share any power and preferring a series of suitors. This gave her the name *The Virgin Queen* and, in honor to her, it is this that gave a colony the name of *Virginia* a few years after her death.

Defeat of the Spanish Armada

Elizabeth I is especially remembered for giving glory to the English nation through the defeat of the Spanish Armada.

King Philip II, the ruler of Catholic Spain and widower of Queen Mary, lost control over the Netherlands in a protestant rebellion. The Protestants in England had abetted the Dutch Protestant rebels and in order to avenge the loss, as well as to make England Catholic again, Philip assembled a grand naval fleet of over one-hundred ships carrying about thirty-thousand men. This became known in England as *The Armada*, after the Spanish word for navy.

After numerous delays, the Armada set sail in July, 1588. When it arrived at Calais, a channel port under English rule in Northern France, the English set fire to all the ships. In August, the panicked Armada lost to the English fleet. Little more than half of the ships returned to Spain. Queen Elizabeth's popularity grew even more in this victory.

In the aftermath of the Armada's overwhelming defeat and building on the development of a strong fleet started by Henry VIII, England began to gain recognition as a great naval power. Nationalism in England increased tremendously. Thoughts of becoming a colonial power were inspired. These thoughts were aided by the fact that the defeated Spanish lost both money and morale, and would be easy to oppose in the New World.

Roanoke Island and the Lost Colony

The English had already begun the exploration of the New World prior to the Armada's defeat. In 1584, Queen Elizabeth granted Sir Walter Raleigh a charter authorizing him to explore the island of Roanoke, which is part of what is now North Carolina.

Between 1584 and 1586, Raleigh financed expeditions to explore the island of Roanoke and determine if the conditions were proper for settlement. In 1586, about a hundred men were left on the island. They struggled to survive, being reduced to eating dogs. They were, however, rescued- except for fifteen men whose fate remained a mystery.

After another expedition in 1587, another group of men, women, and children- a total of more than one-hundred people- remained on the island. Governor John White of the Roanoke colony discovered from a local Native American tribe that the fifteen men who were not rescued were killed by a rival tribe. While attempting to gain revenge, White's men killed members of a friendly tribe and not the members of the tribe that allegedly killed the fifteen men.

Having thus strained relations with the Natives, the settlers could not survive easily. John White decided to return to England in 1587 and return with more supplies. When he returned, England faced war against Spain. Thus delayed, White could not return to Roanoke until 1590. When he did return, White discovered that Roanoke was abandoned. No attempt was made to discover the actual cause of the disappearance until several years later.

There are only theories as to the cause of the loss of Roanoke. There are two major possibilities. Firstly, the settlers may have been massacred by the Natives. Second, the settlers may have assimilated themselves into the Native tribes. But there is no evidence that settles the matter beyond doubt.