German Expertise in the Americas: John Smith's Description of the Jamestown Colony in Virginia (1612)

Abstract

This source is part of a compilation of texts in which John Smith (1580–1631) and his fellow colonists described the initial years of the Jamestown Colony in Virginia, the first permanent English settlement in the Americas. The texts, composed between 1607 and 1608 and published in Oxford in 1612, describe the settlers' various activities, including their explorations of their environs and the construction and the maintenance of their fort. In this excerpt, we learn that "Poles and Dutch" were involved in crucial artisanal work associated with metals, specifically copper. "Dutch" in this context refers to Germans, a typical conflation in early American writing, often stemming from "Deutsch." The description points to the global reach of German experts and their importance in establishing European settlements.

Source

The Proceedings of the English Colonie in Virginia

[…] whole company every Satturday exercised in a fielde prepared for that purpose; the boates trimmed for trade which in their journey encountred the second supply, that brought them back to discover the country of *Monscan*, how, or why, Captaine *Newport* obtained such a private commission as not to returne without a lumpe of gold, a certainty of the south-sea or one of the lost company of Sr. *Walter Rawley* I know not nor why he brought such a 5 pieced barge, not to beare us to that south sea, till we had borne her over the mountains, which how farre they extend is yet unknowne as for the coronation of *Powhatan* & his presents of Bason, Ewer, Bed, Clothes, and such costly novelties, they had bin much better well spared, then so ill spent. For we had his favour much better, onlie for a poore peece of Copper, till this stately kinde of soliciting made him so much overvalue himselfe, that he respected us as much as nothing at all; as for the hiring of the Poles and Dutch to make pitch and tarre, glasse, milles, and sope-ashes, was most necessarie and well. But to send them and seaventy more without victuall to worke, was not so well considered; yet this could not have hurt us had they bin 200. (though the we were 130 that wanted for our selves.) For we had the Salvages in that Decorum, (their harvest being newly gathered) that we feared not to get victuall suficient had we bin 500. Now was there no way to make us miserable but to neglect that time to make our provision, whilst it was to be had; the which was done to perfourme this strange discovery, but more strange coronation, to loose that time, spend that victuall […]

Source: *The Proceedings of the English Colonie in Virginia since their first beginning from England in the yeare of our Lord 1606, till this present 1612, with all their accidents that befell them in their Journies and Discoveries*. At Oxford: Printed by Joseph Barnes, 1612, p. 42.

Recommended Citation: German Expertise in the Americas: John Smith's Description of the Jamestown Colony in Virginia (1612), published in: German History Intersections, <https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/germanness/ghis:document-279> [September 16, 2026].