It was a hot August night in 1590. John White and his crew had spent weeks sailing across the Atlantic Ocean from England. Finally, they spotted the rugged shore of Roanoke Island. It was off the coast of what is now North Carolina. White was anxious to see the family and friends he had left behind three years earlier. He especially missed his daughter and baby granddaughter.

But when White reached the island, no one was there. The wooden houses had been taken apart. The island was overgrown with weeds. One of the few clues was a single word carved into a wooden post: CROATOAN. White knew that was an island about 50 miles south. It was where a friendly Native American tribe called the Croatoans lived. Had the missing colonists moved there?

White never found out. Raging storms kept him from searching. He was forced to return to England. To this day, no one knows what happened to the lost colony of Roanoke.

**A Rough Start**

White and about 115 other men, women, and children arrived on Roanoke Island in 1587. They planned to set up the first permanent English settlement in what they called the New World. It wasn’t the first time White had visited Roanoke. He had been part of a crew that explored the island and the surrounding area two years earlier. Members of that expedition had killed the leader of a local Native American tribe. So
when White returned to establish the Roanoke colony, the Native people were not welcoming. They attacked the colonists. They killed one of them.

White’s group faced many hardships as well. The land wasn’t suitable for growing crops. The colonists were quickly running out of food. White worried they wouldn’t survive.

Just a month into their new life, he sailed back to England for supplies. White’s trip back to America was delayed by a war between England and Spain. He never saw the colonists again.

**Digging for Clues**

More than 400 years later, historians are still trying to crack the case. Did the colonists move away? Were they attacked by enemies? No bones or graves belonging to the colonists were discovered on Roanoke. But clues were found nearby.

Researchers have dug up artifacts. These include a sword handle and stone writing tablet on the island of Croatoan. (It’s now called Hatteras.) Experts have also excavated pieces of old English pottery from an area 50 miles west of Roanoke. The area is known as Site X.

Archaeologist Eric Klingelhofer says these clues suggest that the colonists split up and moved to different areas. But others say the items could have belonged to Native Americans who traded with European colonists. The search for answers continues.

“We’ll keep digging until we solve this mystery, one of the greatest in American history,” Klingelhofer says.

**Words to Know**

- **settlement** noun. a place where people set up a new community
- **excavated** verb, past tense. uncovered objects by digging

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**TO THIS Colony?**

The famous case of a lost colony.

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**A Change of Plans**

The Roanoke colonists’ original plan was to settle on the shore of the Chesapeake Bay. Who knows if the colony would have survived in a different area.

**WORDS TO KNOW**

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**Colombian Times**

Columbus opened the door for Spain, France, the Netherlands, and England to explore and establish colonies in the Americas. The first successful English colony was Jamestown, founded in 1607.

**America Today**

In 1776, the 13 British Colonies declared their independence from England. They later became the first 13 states. Over time, the nation grew to include the 50 states we have today.