

## **Tobacco: The Intriguing Story of Bermuda and Virginia**

Tobacco (*nicotiana tabacum*) most certainly originated in central and south Americas and the Caribbean. Christopher Columbus in 1492 sailed into Cuba's Haia de Gibara looking for gold but found Indians who "smoked like chimneys". Rodrigo de Jerez who was with Columbus was the first European to smoke a roll of tobacco from a cornhusk pipe. Upon his return to Spain he was jailed for smoking as it was considered sinful, but smoking became popular in Spain within a few years as it did elsewhere. Britain occupied Cuba in 1763 and began importing Cuban Cigars to Europe. Today "Havana cigars" are still reputed to be the best in the World.

Another famous name associated with tobacco is Sir Walter Raleigh who established the "lost colony" at Roanoke Island in Virginia in 1585. It was here that he first experienced tobacco. Sir Thomas Harriot, a historian, accompanied him to Roanoke a year later and wrote about the strange weed in his "Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia". The Indians claimed that tobacco "opened their pores" and had curative powers. The Indians called it "Uppowoc"; "tobacco" is the Spanish word for the plant. Raleigh introduced tobacco to England and Europe. In 1605 King James who considered tobacco as "loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, and harmful to the brain" levied a huge tax (4000%) on its importation to discourage its use.

Notwithstanding this initial resistance tobacco became very popular in Europe and a few years later the exportation of it from Virginia to Europe saved (financially) the colony at Jamestown. What were the circumstances that led to this successful industry in Virginia in the early 1600's and what did Bermuda have to do with it?

It is this writer's position that the Spanish or Portuguese well acquainted with tobacco since 1492 planted tobacco in Bermuda and probably the better quality Caribbean or Cuban variety. Raleigh's Indian tobacco was an inferior quality of tobacco compared to the Cuban tobacco. Tobacco does not cross oceans easily and grow naturally or wild, yet two patches of tobacco were found in Bermuda: In 1603 tobacco was found by the shipwrecked Captain Ramirez at Spanish Point (recorded by Henry May's account of the incident) and it is arguable that Sir George Somers found or grew a patch of tobacco at "Tobacco Bay", St Georges in 1609. Could it be that Sir George Somers and John Rolfe (both on the Sea Venture wrecked in Bermuda on its way to Jamestown in July 1609) took the Bermuda

Tobacco seed to Virginia from Bermuda on the two ships they built, the Deliverance and Patience, in May 1610?

There are five points supporting this theory:

[1] On Sir George Somers' map of Bermuda made in 1609 (the one retained by the Bermuda Archives) a bay near Gates' Bay (St Catharine's beach today) is called Tobacco Bay. Many of the hand written names on this map reflect the Sea Venture wreck (Gates' Bay, Strachey's Watch, Somers' Creek and Frobisher's Buildings Bay) and were most likely added later (The Somers' map in London has no such place names). Clearly these handwritten names were added by someone who knew intimately about or took part in the Sea Venture wreck (Christopher Carter or by someone for the Plough which returned and settled Bermuda in 1612). Further it is clear that more than one copy was made of the Somers' map and it is logical that one would have been taken back to Bermuda on the Plough in 1612 to assist the approach and the new settlement. This could be the map in the Bermuda Archives with the handwritten names and explains why the London Archives copy of the Somers' map has no place names.

[2] Silvester Jourdain who was also on the Sea Venture wrote an account (along with Strachey) about their sojourn on Bermuda and he writes that they found "verie good tobacco".

[3] In the recent Jamestown, Virginia excavations, archaeologists found many Bermuda artifacts in the 1610 excavation layer (date of arrival of the Deliverance and Patience from Bermuda) including pig and Cahow bones, shells, Bermuda limestone ballast and in particular two "carved" Bermuda limestone tobacco pipes. It is unlikely that they had tobacco on the Sea Venture to smoke which was not lost or ruined in the wreck, and pretty certain that they actually found tobacco growing in Bermuda (as Jourdain's writings confirm).

[4] It is logical [there are a number of references to this idea in Spanish reports of the 1500's] that the Spanish or Portuguese who knew of Bermuda since 1503 or so, deliberately left hogs on the island as a food source so that they could stop by on their return journeys to Spain/ Portugal and re provision with meat (hogs, fish and Cahows) and water: so why not tobacco?

[5] Tobacco Bay is very accessible to Murray's Anchorage a natural deepwater anchorage probably known to the Spanish and an easy point to stop off to replenish supplies (a fresh water source existed just over the hill in today's "Somers'

Garden”) without having to enter a harbour. These supplies would have included tobacco at Tobacco Bay.

It is interesting to speculate that the horrific reputation of Bermuda as the “Isle of Devils” was allowed to spread or indeed was promoted by the Spanish to protect this source of provisioning in the mid Atlantic! The Spanish were also very upset when the British settled Bermuda and endlessly discussed taking it by force but that never happened.

John Rolfe was on the Sea Venture and stranded in Bermuda with his pregnant wife. She gave birth to a baby girl who was christened “Bermudas” but Bermudas soon died a few weeks later and was buried in Bermuda. His wife subsequently died in Jamestown and he later married Pocahontas. It is probable that whilst shipwrecked in Bermuda he smoked the Bermuda (Spanish) tobacco found there and gathered tobacco seeds from the tobacco found near Tobacco Bay or Spanish Point and later cultivated tobacco in Virginia. With slow but solid progress over a number of years in Virginia he developed a very successful export business of a good quality tobacco much preferred to the harsh Indian tobacco.

In the book “the True Story of Pocahontas” by Dr. Linwood “Little Bear” Custalow and Angela L. Daniel “Silver Star” much is said about John Rolfe, Pocahontas and Tobacco based on Indian Legend and oral history passed down by generations of Mattaponi Indians part of the Powhatan Empire of Virginia. “When Rolfe and his English wife arrived in Jamestown in 1610 [on the Deliverance from Bermuda] he immediately focused his attention on growing tobacco”. “By 1612, Rolfe’s first crop was curing. It was taller than the Powhatan type of tobacco and showed promise....Rolfe received word that his tobacco had begun to be compared favorably with the best Spanish leaf, but it was still not good enough to be competitive with Spanish tobacco...”. “Rolfe’s problems in competing with Spanish tobacco appeared to stem from lack of knowledge and care in curing the tobacco.” After Rolfe married Pocahontas (his English wife had died) he learned from the Mattaponi how to cure tobacco. Some suggest this is why he married Pocahontas (?) “According to Mattaponi sacred oral history, the native people of the New World possessed the knowledge of how to cure and process tobacco successfully. The Powhatan tobacco was harsher and had a strong bite making it difficult to inhale deeply. Rolfe used the West Indies tobacco seed [found in Bermuda?] which was much milder to inhale.” This Bermuda tobacco cured by the Powhatan methods eventually matched the taste of the Spanish tobacco and was a success. “The year 1616 was the year the investors in the Virginia Company were to receive their returns, otherwise the colony would fold”. By 1618 Virginia was

exporting 40,000 pounds of tobacco and by 1630 1.5 million pounds of tobacco were shipped from Virginia. “Tobacco became the gold the colonists had been looking for.”

The three sailors on the Sea Venture who were left in Bermuda by Sir George Somers in 1610, Carter, Chard and Waters grew tobacco at their camp site on Smith’s island which is confirmed by Jourdain’s writings. Jourdain writes that “they [Carter, Chard and Waters on Bermuda from 1610 to 1612] have made a great deal of tobacco, and if some would come that have skill in making it, it would see very commodious both to the merchant and to the maker of it.” Tobacco was already growing in Bermuda! Tobacco after 1612 when Bermuda was settled became a very successful export for Bermuda, as it was high quality and attracted high prices. By 1624 Bermuda was exporting 70,000 lbs of tobacco per year but by then Virginia’s tobacco exports had caught up to Bermuda. By 1630, Virginia had far surpassed Bermuda’s exports of tobacco.

Although the settlers at Jamestown never found a route to Asia or any gold, tobacco lead by John Rolfe thrived in Virginia and its export financially saved the colony. As the Deliverance and Patience sailing from Bermuda in 1610 saved Jamestown from total destruction after they arrived in the “nick of time” to find 60 Settlers near death at Jamestown, those two little ships did it a second time, by introducing the superior Spanish tobacco seed from Bermuda. The incredible story of the Sea Venture and unbelievable timing and series of events that led to saving Jamestown not once but twice suggests some kind of divine intervention and that the birth of the United States was simply meant to happen...thanks to Bermuda.

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