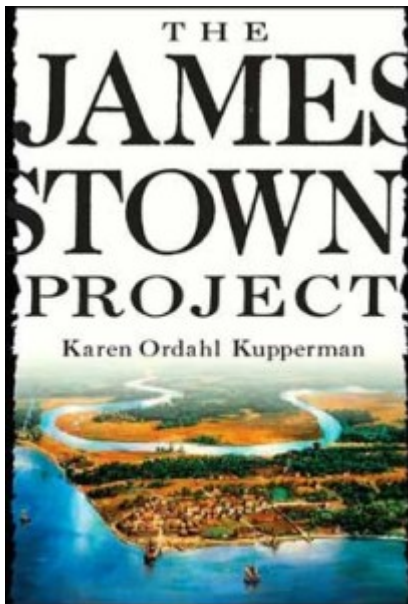
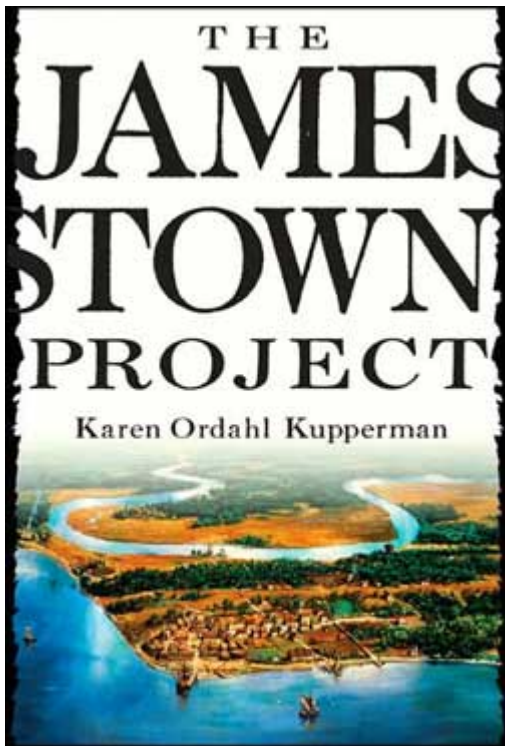


The Jamestown Project



Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *The Jamestown Project*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. 392 pp., hardcover, \$29.95.

In “our agreed upon national story,” historian Karen Ordahl Kupperman writes in the opening to her recent book, *The Jamestown Project*, the Pilgrims who settled Plymouth Plantation “are portrayed as the direct opposites” of those men and women who settled the earliest successful English colonial outpost at Jamestown. The Pilgrims, she writes, too often are portrayed as “humble people who wanted only a place to worship God as they saw fit,” as pious Christians

who “lived on terms of amity with one another and with the neighboring Indians, relationships memorialized in the First Thanksgiving,” and as industrious souls who “occupied family farms and were content with self-sufficiency.” The Pilgrims, in popular consciousness, “are the forebears we prefer to acknowledge” (2).

While the large outpouring of books, both scholarly and popular, coinciding with last year’s four-hundredth anniversary of the settlement of Virginia may have done something to restore Jamestown to its national prominence, Kupperman has done a nice job in this volume of placing Jamestown in its Atlantic context. The Jamestown “project” was one of many in which adventurers could invest their money, and she describes clearly England’s growing interest in America. The storytelling in the opening chapters and her colorful biographies of figures who generally are little known in the scholarship of early English maritime expansion are welcome additions to the literature. As she has shown in her other work, Kupperman is entirely comfortable working with matters related to the English side of the Atlantic.

Kupperman, in fact, spends so much time exploring the background and the context for the Jamestown project that she only gets to the actual colony in the final third of her book. The colony, without question, had “uncertain beginnings” but, she argues, “the remarkable thing about Jamestown is that the investors and the colonists did not simply walk away from the project” (240). They persevered, and they “revised” the project. Martial law under the Virginia Company of London’s military regime kept the colony alive—barely—but something more was needed. Beginning around 1618, changes became evident. Some of these were initiated by the directors of the company, the colony’s sponsor, while the colonists initiated others by themselves. The result was a “mission and education program on a very dramatic scale” supported by donors at home, which “set the Jamestown project apart from all other English overseas engagements” (299); a commitment to “the kinds of diversified production that the company kept calling for” and not simply a single-minded devotion to commodity production; and the development “of genuine communities composed of families growing up away from Jamestown,” which, “like contemporary Plymouth in New England, increasingly resembled English country villages” (323).

From this discussion, Kupperman concludes that “the key to building English societies abroad, however messy and incomplete, was discovered in Virginia.” The colony established a model for success that all subsequent English colonies would follow: “Devolution—transfer of control to America—and fostering initiative on colonists’ own account were the answer to all those questions about how to motivate people and create new societies” (327). Private property, and the sort of political institutions represented by Virginia’s colonial assembly, provided the recipe for colonial success.

Readers familiar with the history of Jamestown will not find much that is new in this portion of Kupperman’s account, but they will be impressed by the skill with which she has integrated the recent archaeological evidence from Jamestown

into her discussion. Kupperman has done a wonderful job, as well, in bringing to life individuals whose names and stories are passed by too quickly in the traditional accounts. This is an extremely well-written book infused with outstanding storytelling.

There are, however, questions that might be raised about the argument and Kupperman's conclusions. Jamestown may well have discovered the recipe for colonial success, but other colonies did so as well, and they may have reached that point on their own. One must remember that the Plymouth separatists often saw Jamestown as an example of what not to do, even if they occasionally failed to learn themselves from the earlier colony's mistakes. Furthermore, there can be no denying the great continuities that run through English colonization. If the means changed, the ends remained remarkably stable: to harvest the wealth of North America, establish an outpost against England's imperial rivals, and to spread the reformed religion abroad. Many of the problems that existed before 1622 continued to shape colonial development long after that date.

And then there is the question of what, precisely, constitutes a successful colonial venture. Kupperman asserts that Jamestown was on the road to establishing a stable society, and she certainly has evidence to support her claim, but others within the seventeenth-century Atlantic community seem to have adhered to different measures of colonial success. Should we look for permanence? stability? something more? There is, in Kupperman's account, relatively little discussion of slavery and indentured servitude in early Virginia. Slavery appears in the index only under the heading of "West Africa, slave trade." Wasn't bond labor, and in particular the institution of African slavery, at least in part responsible for the success of the Jamestown project? Was the denial of freedom to some essential for the survival and success of others in the colony? Certainly Kupperman is correct in arguing, as did Bernard Bailyn and Edmund Morgan before her, that some of the servants who survived their terms of servitude managed to rise to positions of prominence in the colony. As Morgan has shown in *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975), however, this upward mobility was a relatively short-lived phenomenon. Morgan argued, in what is still one of the most important discussions of seventeenth-century Virginia, that the colony's success came only with the development of a social system that nourished the freedom of white men while at the same time making possible the unlimited exploitation of labor. Virginia achieved success only when its planters had established something approximating a *herrenvolk* democracy—all white men could be considered equal in Virginia because the presence of Africans and African Americans created a level beneath which no white man could ever fall.

Imperial interests in England, such as they were, also maintained a measure of success for the Virginia venture. Because Kupperman's narrative ends so early in Virginia's history, she does not address as closely as she might have done their understanding of the place of the Old Dominion within the empire. Given her mastery of the transatlantic dimensions of Early American history, one wishes her story had been carried farther forward in time. Certainly that James

I initiated legal proceedings to take away the Virginia Company's charter and to royalize the colony—a process that was complete by 1624—suggests that in his eyes the colony had not achieved a sufficient level of success. Indeed, it appears that by the standards of the Crown, success in Virginia would prove remarkably elusive. Order on the frontier remained always tenuous, and the king's governors general struggled to preserve peace and order. The most significant shock to the system came in 1676, when the colony erupted in a rebellion that forced Governor Sir William Berkeley to flee to the Eastern Shore while the followers of Nathaniel Bacon torched Jamestown. Charles II, determined to restore order in his most important mainland colony, dispatched a royal commission backed by more than a thousand royal troops to crush the rebellion and restore order. The commissioners' investigation provided ample evidence that the colony was locked in a fundamental social and political crisis. From the perspective of the Crown, the colony was not a success.

These are, of course, big questions over which historians of early Virginia have been arguing for many decades. To expect one historian to address all of them in one book is not realistic, and Kupperman is to be commended for all that she has done in this beautifully written volume. To place Jamestown in its proper Atlantic context, to explore the many other colonial "projects" with which it competed for attention and investors, to help synthesize the recent, exciting archaeological work from Jamestown, and to explain the difficulties and challenges that had to be overcome in order to plant successful colonies are all important achievements. For these reasons, and more, Kupperman's book will be required reading for historians of Early Virginia.

This article originally appeared in issue 8.3 (April, 2008).

Michael Leroy Oberg is professor of history at SUNY-Geneseo and author, most recently, of *The Head in Edward Nugent's Hand: Roanoke's Forgotten Indians* (2007).