

TRUE STORIES FROM THE AMERICAN PAST



Volume I: To 1865

Edited by Altina L. Waller and William Graebner

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Altina L. Waller

University of Connecticut, Storrs

William Graebner

State University of New York
College at Fredonia

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VOLUME I: TO 1865

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About the Authors

BERNARD BAILYN is Adams University Professor and James Duncan Phillips Professor of Early American History emeritus at Harvard University. He is the author or editor of more than twenty-five books including *New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century* (1955); *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) which won the Pulitzer and Bancroft Prizes; *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (1974) which won the National Book Award in History; *Voyagers to the West* (1986) which won the Pulitzer Prize and the Saloutos Award of the Immigration History Society; *Faces of Revolution* (1990); and *On the Teaching and Writing of History* (1994). In 1993 he received the Thomas Jefferson Medal of the American Philosophical Society for his work in history. He is Director of Harvard's International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World.

MICHAEL A. BELLESILES teaches legal history at Emory University. He is the author of *Revolutionary Outlaws: Ethan Allen and the Struggle for Independence on the Early American Frontier* (University of Virginia Press, 1993). Currently, he is working on a history of gun laws in America.

THOMAS J. DAVIS is professor of African American Studies and History at the State University of New York in Buffalo. A historian and lawyer, he is editor of *The New York Conspiracy* (Boston: Beacon Press 1971) and author of *A Rumor of Revolt: The 'Great Negro Plot' in Colonial New York* (New York: Free Press/Macmillan 1985), paperback edition (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1990) and most recently with Michael L. Conniff, of *Africans in the Americas: A History of the Black Diaspora* (New York: St. Martin's Press 1994).

R. DAVID EDMUNDS is professor of history at Indiana University. He is the author of *The Potawatomis: Keepers of the Fire* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 1978), *The Shawnee Prophet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1983), *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1984). He

has co-authored *The Fox Wars: The Mesquakie Challenge to New France* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 1993) with Joseph L. Peyser, and has edited *American Indian Leaders: Studies in Diversity* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1980). Edmunds is of Cherokee descent and has served as the Acting Director of the McNickle Center for Indian History at the Newberry Library. He has held Ford Foundation and Guggenheim fellowships.

WILLIAM GRAEBNER is professor of history at the State University of New York, College at Fredonia. He has written on a variety of aspects of twentieth-century American history. His books include *A History of Retirement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), *The Engineering of Consent: Democracy and Authority in Twentieth-Century America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), *Coming of Age in Buffalo* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), and *The Age of Doubt: American Thought and Culture in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne, 1991). He is Associate Editor of *American Studies*.

KAREN ORDAHL KUPPERMAN: Professor of History at New York University, holds a Ph.D. from Cambridge University. She is the author of *Providence Island 1630–1641: The Other Puritan Colony* (1993), which won the Beveridge Prize of the American Historical Association. She also authored *Roanoke, The Abandoned Colony* (1984), and *Settling With the Indians: The Meeting of English and Indian Cultures in America, 1580–1640* (1980). Her edited books include *America in European Consciousness* (1995), *Major Problems in American Colonial History* (1993), and *Captain John Smith: A Select Edition of His Writings* (1988). Her essay, “Apathy and Death in Early Jamestown,” published in the *Journal of American History* in 1979, won the Binkley Stephenson Award of the Organization of American Historians. She has chaired the Council of the Institute of Early American History and Culture and the editorial board of the *William and Mary Quarterly*.

KENNETH LOCKRIDGE is Professor Emeritus at the University of Michigan. His book *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years* (New York 1970) was voted by the profession one of the significant books in American History in the 1970s. Other works include *Literacy in Colonial New England* (1974), *Settlement and Unsettlement in Early America: The Crisis of Political Legitimacy Before the Revolution* (1981), *The Diary and Life of William Byrd of Virginia 1674–1744* (1987), and *On the Sources of Patriarchal Rage: The Commonplace Books of William Byrd and Thomas Jefferson and the Gendering of Power in the Eighteenth Century* (1992). He has recently appeared on The History Channel with a lecture on “Robert Bolling’s Dirty Pictures: Gender and Self-Construction in Jefferson’s Virginia.”

MELTON MCLAURIN, professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, received his Ph.D. from the University of South Carolina. In addition to *Celia: A Slave* (1991), his books on the American South include *Separate Pasts: Growing Up White in the Segregated South* (University of Georgia Press 1987), and *You Wrote My Life, Lyrical Themes in Country Music* (Philadelphia 1992).

STEPHEN NISSENBAUM teaches history at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. His most recent book is *The Battle for Christmas* (Knopf 1996). He has also written *Salem Possessed: Social Origins of Witchcraft* (with Paul S. Boyer, 1974), *Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America* (1980), *The Pursuit of Liberty* (third edition 1996; a multi-authored textbook), and *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (1996, with Edward L. Ayers, Patricia Nelson Limerick, and Peter Onuf). Active in the public humanities, he has served as member and president of the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities. He holds degrees from Harvard College, Columbia University, and the University of Wisconsin.

GREGORY H. NOBLES is Professor of History and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at Georgia Institute of Technology. His first book, *Divisions Throughout the Whole: Politics and Society in Hampshire County, Massachusetts, 1740–1775*, (New York 1983) dealt with pre-Revolutionary politics in a region that later became the center of Shaysite activity. His most recent work, a book on American Frontiers, will be published by Hill and Wang in 1996. He has held fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Antiquarian Society and has been a Fulbright scholar in New Zealand.

NANCY SHOEMAKER is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire. Her Ph.D. is from the University of Minnesota and she has taught at Texas Christian University and the State University of New York at Plattsburgh. She has published several articles on American Indian gender and family history and is the editor of *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women* (Routledge 1995).

EVERARD H. SMITH is regional coordinator for the North Carolina Information Highway and a part-time faculty member in the Department of History at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. A specialist in Confederate manuscript sources and on the Valley Campaign of 1864, he was a contributing author to *The Image of War*, published by the National Historical Society, and a consultant to "Civil War: The North Carolina Story," produced by the University of North Carolina Center for Public Television. His articles have appeared in *Civil War Times Illustrated*, *Civil War Magazine*, *The North Carolina Historical Review*, and *The American Historical Review*, among others.

PATRICIA J. TRACY is professor of History, American Studies, and Women's Studies at Williams College. She is the author of *Jonathan Edwards, Pastor: Religion and Society and Eighteenth Century Northampton* (New York: Hill and Wang 1980) and articles in the *Journal of Social History*, the *Massachusetts Review* and the forthcoming encyclopedia of *American National Biography*. Having long researched the economic and demographic experiences of New England communities, she is now writing a book on the Anglo-American development of what we now call traditional models of masculinity and femininity in the period 1500–1800 and their place in the culture of capitalism.

ALTINA L. WALLER is professor of history and Chair of the department at the University of Connecticut at Storrs. She received her doctorate from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and has taught at West Virginia University, Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, and the State University of New York at Plattsburgh. She has held fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Her books include *Appalachia in the Making: The Southern Mountains in the Nineteenth Century* (co-edited with Mary Beth Pudup and Dwight Billings, 1995), *Reverend Beecher and Mrs. Tilton: Sex and Class in Victorian America* (1982), and *Feud: Hatfields, McCoys and Social Change in Appalachia, 1860–1900* (1988).

PETER J. WAY received his doctorate from the University of Maryland. He is the author of *Common Labour: Workers and the Digging of North American Canals, 1780–1860* which won the Frederick Jackson Turner Prize from the Organization of American Historians and 1994 Phillip Taft Prize awarded by Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations to the best book published in labor history. His articles have appeared in *Labor History*, *The British Journal of American Studies*, and *The British Journal of Canadian Studies*. His recent article, "Evil Humors and Ardent Spirits: The Rough Culture of Canal Construction Laborers," won the OAH 1994 Binkley-Stephenson Prize for the best article published in *The Journal of American History* in 1993. He is presently working on a labor history of British regular soldiers in the French and Indian War. Way is a Reader in American History at the University of Sussex in England.

JOHN ALEXANDER WILLIAMS is Professor of History and Director of the Center for Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University. He holds the doctorate in history from Yale University and has taught at the universities of Notre Dame, Illinois (Chicago) and at West Virginia University. He has served as an administrator in three federal cultural agencies, including the National Endowment for the Humanities. He has published three books on West Virginia (1976–1993) and is the author, with Mark Samels, of the script for *West Virginia: A Film History*, a four-part documentary first broadcast in 1995. His publications also include *Old Ties and New Attachments: Italian-Americans in the West* (1992), co-edited with David Taylor. He is currently working on both print and film versions of the history of the Appalachian region.

Preface

True Stories is a special kind of reader. It consists of fifteen stories, each thoroughly researched and impeccably crafted by scholars who are authorities in their respective fields. Each story deals with a significant and compelling episode in the history of the United States from the seventeenth century through Reconstruction.

In selecting the stories, we have been moved by the sense that the American past is too rich and varied to be bound and contained by the traditional and comfortable narratives with which most historians are conversant. Nonetheless, some of our stories—the story of starvation and disease during Jamestown’s early years, or the account of Benjamin Franklin’s intellectual and social transformation from a printer’s apprentice to America’s foremost Enlightenment figure and “father” of the United States—will be generally familiar to instructors, if not students. Other stories examine familiar historical figures such as William Byrd of Virginia, Andrew Jackson, and Tecumseh from a fresh perspective—in Byrd’s case, his domestic troubles and misogyny toward women; in Jackson’s case, his resistance to social changes in patriarchy and family life; and in Tecumseh’s case, the War of 1812 from the Native American point of view. Still others, including the story of the “Christmas Riots” and the conversion of a Mohawk woman, Kateri Tekakwitha, to Catholicism, concern issues and incidents that are not even mentioned in survey textbooks. We hope readers will appreciate the remarkable diversity of *True Stories*.

Together, the stories cover a wide variety of fields of historical inquiry, many of them new to the study of history in the last two or three decades. These include popular culture; the history of Native Americans; the history of African-Americans; women’s history; labor and immigration history; and the social and psychological history of war. Most important, each episode was selected because it promised to make, well, a good story.

Why use stories to study and learn history? The idea is not as unusual as it might seem. We live in a culture steeped in stories: the myths of ancient Greece,

Biblical narratives, bedtime stories, fairy tales, newspaper accounts, Hollywood epics, neighborhood rumors, one's personal account of the day's events after a hard day at school or at the office. Even the standard history textbooks are essentially stories—longer, more general, more familiar, and more generally accepted stories than the ones found in this book—but stories, just the same.

The accounts that make up *True Stories* are obviously not myths, or fairy tales, or rumors. They are a certain kind of story that we easily recognize as “history.” Indeed, history might be understood as a set of analytical stories about the past whose authors think are “true.” When we read an historical account, we expect it to be balanced, to be based on historical research and “fact,” and to show respect for the past; by these standards, the stories in *True Stories* certainly qualify as history. But it is not quite the history one finds in a history textbook. *True Stories* features people who live and act in specific places and times and in precise historical circumstances. Its flesh and blood protagonists—some of them resembling mythic heroes or anti-heroes—set out to burn cities, lay siege to forts, challenge superior military forces, build canals, and defy rapists. In short, one function of any story—and one purpose of *True Stories*—is to put people, and people's deeds, back into history.

There is another lesson to be learned from these stories, one that has to do with what a story is. Although the stories presented here often involve individuals acting in specific situations, they have significance that goes far beyond the setting or the actors. The people in *True Stories* (indeed, all of us) inevitably live their lives on the stage of history. The things that they do—even the odd, eccentric, or criminal things—are ultimately historical deeds, carried out within the economic, political, social, and cultural frameworks of a particular historical era. Therefore, a good story provides the insights of the traditional textbook, though in a very different form.

Sometimes it can be difficult to see the connections between a story and history, between the text and its context. When one sees a movie, or watches the 11 o'clock television news, one does not easily or automatically think of these “stories” as part of history; and making the connections between a specific event and the larger past can be more difficult when the event occurred decades ago. To help students make these connections, and to see the need for making them, each episode concludes with an interpretative section that pulls together the themes in the story and links the story proper with some larger and familiar historical context. For example, the seemingly erratic ravings of William Byrd against women and his exaggerated fears of female sexuality emerge from the cultural stresses of colonial status seeking; and the Peggy Eaton scandal was firmly rooted in radically changing definitions of family and women's role in society.

Each episode, then, has two distinct parts. The first part is the narrated story. Our goal was to keep this story section as free as possible from analysis and interpretation, in the hope that students would fashion their own perspectives once freed, if only relatively and momentarily, from the learned authority of the historian. The second part of the episode is a shorter interpretative conclusion, where the authors have been given free rein to bring their considerable analytical skills to bear on the body of the story.

As students and instructors will discover, the attempt to separate narrative

and interpretation has been only moderately successful. Even the most rudimentary collections of “facts” and the simplest narratives begin with preconceptions, proceed from moral and ethical premises, and imply interpretive frameworks. So do our “true stories.” Despite our efforts to put these elements in the background, they inevitably appear in the stories. Indeed, one purpose of the collection is to draw attention to the inescapable subjectivity of historians. Nonetheless, we also believe that the effort made here to separate narrative and analysis can assist students in generating their own readings of the past and, by doing so, in becoming active participants in the complex process of understanding and creating their own history.

Altina L. Waller
William Graebner

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THE STARVING TIME AT JAMESTOWN

KAREN ORDAHL KUPPERMAN

The journey of Christopher Columbus in 1492 signaled the beginning of the greatest migration in the history of the world. The Spanish and Portuguese began the great migration with the conquest of the native peoples of Central and South America, building grand cities and extracting the vast gold and silver resources for the benefit of their countries. But it was not long before northern Europeans—the British, Dutch, French, and Scandinavians—emigrated in even greater numbers. By the middle of the seventeenth century, many thousands of people had crossed the ocean from Europe and Africa to the new world, some as hopeful aspirants to a new and better life and many as coerced migrants—criminals, indentured servants, and slaves. All the migrants had to endure the long sea voyage, in which food, water, and exercise were scarce, leading to suffering, disease, and irritable tempers. Upon arrival, even the most privileged were faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles: food shortages, disease, absence of family and friends, opposition from inhabitants of the land, and sheer exhaustion. Although different groups faced widely varying conditions when they landed in the new world, all had severe adjustments to make as they began to cope with the difficulties of survival in unfamiliar and often threatening conditions.

Karen Kupperman's tale of Jamestown, first settled by the English in 1607, is one of the many stories of the great migration. As inhabitants of the first English settlement to survive on a permanent basis, the migrants to Jamestown had only the Spanish model to emulate, and it soon became apparent that it would not work in the northern hemisphere. There were no gold and silver mines to be exploited and no large populations of Indians to enslave. Lacking these clearly visible sources of potential wealth, financial backers in England had less interest in supporting the attempts of the colonists to stabilize the settlement. Nearby Indians, although at first curious and supportive with gifts of food and advice, were soon alienated by the demanding arrogance of the English and became an ominous and threatening presence. For its first two decades, Jamestown led a tenuous existence as it struggled to survive.

Historians have long striven to comprehend the near disaster at Jamestown, postulating the disease-prone climate, the laziness and greed of the colonists, the exploitation of indentured servants by the wealthy, or the lack of economic incentives such as private property as possible culprits. Kupperman here explores another

approach to the problems encountered by early Jamestown migrants. Using documents written at the time by the participants in the settlement effort, particularly those of the irascible and ubiquitous John Smith, she suggests another explanation, one that does not supplant other theories but enriches them by making use of some modern comparisons. What we have learned in the twentieth century suggests that the psychological aspects of such dramatic changes in both the physical and social environment must be taken into account in order to explain the human suffering and callousness toward others apparent in Jamestown.

Life in Jamestown colony was miserable. By the spring of 1610, three years after the venture's founding, the colonists were desperate, starving, and sick. When reinforcements began to arrive at the end of May and the beginning of June, they found the settlers looking like skeletons and "crying out, 'we are starved, we are starved.'" The newcomers "read a lecture of misery in our people's faces." Of the 500 colonists left there the previous summer, only sixty remained alive. Many had died of dysentery, what the colonists called the "bloody flux," and "burning fevers."

Starvation had driven the men to unheard-of extremes. First they consumed their horses, then they "were glad to make shift with vermin as dogs cats, rats, and mice." When those were gone, the colonists ate their shoes and boots. Finally they began to do things even they described as "incredible." They dug up corpses and ate them, "and some have licked up the blood which hath fallen from their weak fellows." One colonist became addicted to the taste of human flesh and, when he could not be restrained, was executed for it. The "most lamentable" act was committed by a man so desperate that he killed his pregnant wife, threw the unborn child into the river, and chopped up the mother and salted the meat. His crime was not discovered until he had actually eaten some of his cache. The governor quickly had him executed.

Another man, Hugh Pryce, committed an equally distressing act. Pryce, "in a furious distracted mood, came openly into the marketplace Blaspheming, exclaiming and crying out that there was no God" because he thought God would not allow his creatures to suffer so much. When Pryce and a companion ventured into the woods and were killed by Indians, his body was ravaged and disfigured by wolves, but his dead friend was undisturbed. The colonists knew his fate was the judgment of the God he had denied, a punishment delivered as swiftly and surely as the governor's sentence on the cannibals.

Not only did some commit unspeakable crimes, but among the rest there seemed to be no group spirit or sense of mutual respect, none of the "constancy and resolution" leaders expected. Colonists who were able to get into boats tried to sail away to England. Some "unhallowed creatures" actually brought further misery on their "desolate brethren." When sent to trade for corn with the Indians, they disobeyed orders by mistreating the natives whose help the colonists so desperately needed. Then, as soon as their ship was loaded with corn, they conceived the "barbarous project" of deserting Virginia and returning to England. Thus they robbed the settlement of needed corn and turned the natives against it. Then, in order to justify themselves, these "scum of men" spread slanders about the colony back in England.

Colonist Gabriel Archer had warned of the danger almost a year earlier in the summer of 1609, when he returned to Jamestown from a trip to England. He and his companions found the settlers "in such distress" that they were forced to live on what the Indians provided (Archer described them as living on alms like beggars), for an ounce of copper per day. He wrote that the Indians could not possibly have provided more than they did. He blamed earlier visitors who had overpraised the country, describing it as a lush paradise; as a result, backers in England had not seen the need to send sufficient supplies. August, when Archer wrote, should have been a time of plenty when colonists could live off abundant supplies of nuts and berries, game animals, and fish. Instead, they were already in want, and their distress of summer soon turned into the famine of winter. Gabriel Archer would be among the dead of that "starving time" when the winter's toll was counted.

Famine had plagued the colony from the beginning, and it would continue even after the lessons of that terrible winter. Everyone had ideas, and many people spread blame, but no plan seemed able to get the colonists on the right track. The core problem was clear: the colonists were not producing food for themselves. Not only did they not plant and harvest crops, they did not even seem to be able to get food by hunting and fishing. Captain John Smith, who was in the colony from the beginning, wrote of this strange inability: "Now although there be Deer in the woods, Fish in the rivers, and Fowls in abundance in their seasons; yet the woods are so wide, the rivers so broad, and the beasts so wild, and we so unskillful to catch them, we little troubled them nor they us."

Because of their own inability to raise or catch food, the colonists were almost totally reliant on the Indians for sustenance. As the colonists admitted, "had the Savages not fed us, we directly had starved." The Chesapeake-area Algonquians, most of whom owed allegiance to Wahunsonacock, the man the colonists called "the great emperor Powhatan" after the name of his tribe, did have a sophisticated system of food production and storage. Their corn crop, yielding much more food per acre than European farmers could produce, was a marvel to the English. In Jamestown's early days, the Powhatans and their allies were happy to trade food for European manufactured goods that enhanced their own lives. Metal axes and knives, copper cooking pots, and, when they could convince the English to hand them over, muskets were all desirable trade items that could be efficiently integrated into Indian lifestyles.

But as the colony grew and the demands of the settlers became more pressing, Indians grew weary of this continuing reliance, which depleted their own food supplies dramatically. Boats from Jamestown were forced to travel farther and farther around Chesapeake Bay seeking Indians who still might be induced to provide food, and the value of the trade goods became debased. When Indians were reluctant to trade, colonists applied force and threats, which only made matters worse in the long run. Soon a virtual state of war existed, and it became too dangerous to go out to cultivate crops or to hunt because of the fear of snipers who could pick off unwary men without ever even being seen. Thus the crisis of hunger and disease was intensified, and the colonists felt like prisoners in their fort.

The English reading public avidly consumed reports that portrayed the Spanish as ruthless in their treatment of the hapless natives in Latin America, and

supporters of English colonization contrasted their peaceful, benevolent intentions with reports of Spanish pillaging. Smith played on that comparison when he dramatically described his own efforts to find Indians willing to trade food for the goods he had to offer: "The Spaniard never more greedily desired gold than he victual." This image was reinforced when Indians, fed up with the colonists' constant pressure, killed a small party of men led by Lieutenant Michael Sicklemore and left the corpses with bread stuffed in their mouths. Colonist George Percy wrote that the Indians thus showed their "contempt and scorn" and signaled "that others might expect the like when they should come to seek for bread and relief amongst them." Percy was reminded of a story he had read of a Spanish general in Chile, who was killed by having molten gold poured down his throat by outraged Indians, who said to him "now glut thyself with gold." That general (Percy thought his name was Baldivia) had "there sought for gold as Sicklemore did here for food."



Powhatan holding court. Representations of the eastern woodland Indian life evolved during the early years of contact and settlement. This woodcut, which decorated a map of Virginia in John Smith's history, is adapted from a Roanoke colonists' drawing of a carved wooden deity in a temple. (John Carter Brown Library)

So, the Jamestown colonists had come dangerously close to emulating the example of the despised Spaniards in their dependence on native sources of food. And even by using force and threats, they could not possibly get enough food to keep the colony in health. This brings us back to the main issue: Why did they not take the steps necessary to provide their own food? Everyone who looked at the problem came up with the same disturbing answer: the colonists were lazy and impossible to motivate.

But reports from all kinds of sources agreed that this was not just ordinary laziness; something far more disturbing was at work, a “most strange condition” that no one had seen before. Ralph Hamor later wrote that the colonists, “no more sensible than beasts, would rather starve in idleness (witness their former proceedings) than feast in labor.” Colony Secretary William Strachey judged that the suffering at Jamestown was brought on by the settlers’ “sloth, riot, and vanity.” He described them tearing up their houses for firewood rather than walking a short distance into the woods. Sir Thomas Gates offered an “incredible example” of laziness. He watched colonists eat fish raw “rather than they would go a stone’s cast to fetch wood” with which to cook it. Captain John Smith wrote persuasively about Jamestown after his return to England. He described the atmosphere of “malice,



Indians pouring molten gold down a Spaniard's throat. This was a widely circulated legend warning of the dangers of unbridled greed that put more pressure on the Indians than they could tolerate. (John Carter Brown Library)