

Stephen Hopkins

On June 2, 1609, nine ships carrying 600 passengers and supplies sailed from Plymouth for Jamestown, Virginia. The ships were commanded by Admiral Sir George Somers, sometime privateer and three years earlier one of the founders of the London Company, the stock investors in the colony.

Also aboard were George Rolfe who would be known as the husband of Pocahontas and the disciplinarian governor designate of the settlement, Sir Thomas Gates.



Historic Voyage, Sea Venture and Consorts at Sea 1609, a 1984 oil painting by Deryck Foster

As the fleet drew near the Azores, a storm separated the ships. All ships but the Sea Venture made it to Jamestown, and it was presumed lost.

The ship was not lost, but endured a treacherous journey.

As the Sea Venture continued to sail west, it had the misfortune of being struck by yet another hurricane on 25 July. The deputy governor of Virginia, William Strachey, describes the event:

“For four-and-twenty hours the storm in a restless tumult had blown so exceedingly as we could not apprehend in our imaginations any possibility of greater violence...

... the waters like whole rivers did flood the air...winds and seas were as mad as fury and rage could make them.”

On July 28, just as the ship was about to sink, it came upon a rocky coast. It was the “Island of Devils,” as declared by Juan Bermudez, the Spanish explorer who had come upon the island in 1511, but refused to colonize it.

Mariners often avoided the infamous area, as it was a place of “gusts, storms, and foul weather” that some believed was inhabited by evil spirits.

The true source of the island’s infamy lay in the coral reefs that surrounded the island. It was these reefs, not devils, which were responsible for numerous shipwrecks along the island’s shores.

Admiral Somers deliberately ran the Sea Venture aground onto one of these coral reefs in an effort to save those onboard. The boat “fell in between two rocks”, and remarkably, all of the people on the boat were saved.

The Spanish called these the Storm Islands. Somers immediately claimed them for King James and they became known as the Somers Isles. Today, we call it Bermuda.



The wreckage of the Sea Venture on the reefs of Bermuda inadvertently marked the island’s settlement by the British. The settlers and crew found the land to be quite fruitful, and would spend nine months on the island.

As the men enjoyed bountiful food sources and adequate shelter, they built two new ships, the “Deliverance” and the “Patience”, to continue the journey to Jamestown.

Although these ships did eventually set sail for the Virginia colony on May 10, 1610, some passengers stayed behind. Even Admiral Somers eventually returned to the island and remained there till his death. (Info in this section is from Strachey and Hurricane Science)

Apparently, the story of the storm caught the attention of William Shakespeare and it inspired him as he penned his last play, The Tempest. It is even suggested that Stephano, one of the characters in The Tempest is based on Stephen Hopkins, one of the passengers on the Sea Venture.

So, who is Stephen Hopkins and why is he important in America today?

Hopkins Proposed That Good Governance Should be Based on the Consent of the Governed

Hopkins was a mutineer on the Sea Venture. However, his arguments for mutiny have been viewed as important messages that have subsequently led to founding principles of the US.

William Strachey was on-board the Sea Venture and wrote about the voyage. In looking at what Strachey wrote, as well as looking at circumstances at Jamestown and on the Mayflower, Professor Joseph Kelly concluded that Stephen Hopkins “invented the idea that government derived its authority from the consent of the governed.”

Kelly further states,

Hopkins was an unlikely leader. Indifferently educated, the 28-year-old might have had a low-level office leading prayers in the church. He had been an undistinguished farmer who had lost the lease on his fields. But on Bermuda, Hopkins found that he had a natural gift for oratory.

The settlers had all contracted with the Virginia Company, Hopkins admitted. They promised several years of labor. But the company did not keep up its end of the bargain. It was supposed to deliver them safely to Jamestown, and feed and clothe them.

The hurricane intervened. It marooned them on a desert island, an abundant wilderness owned by no one. The shipwreck, he reasoned, dissolved their contract with the company, just as the waves had picked apart the Sea Venture on the reef.

These circumstances placed the castaways in a unique political circumstance. Each castaway, Hopkins explained, had been “freed ... from the government of any man.” Even the “meanest” or poorest laborer among them was bound only by the natural law of self-preservation, which compelled him to “provide for himself and his own family.”

It was out of the mess that was Jamestown, not the order of Plymouth, that American democracy was truly born. It was Jamestown’s colonists—in fact one particular man named Stephen Hopkins, present at both Jamestown and Plymouth—who invented the idea that government derived its authority from the consent of the governed.

Hopkins did not use these terms, but he was describing pre-civil man in “the state of nature,” which is the basis of the social contract that would be theorized decades later by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke.

Without the company contract binding them, Hopkins said, everyone was free. Each man could choose for himself if he would submit to Gates’ authority, strike out on his own, or head into the woods in a cooperative venture with other settlers.

Before the great escape to a nearby island had fully developed, two spies denounced Hopkins. Governor Gates again gathered everyone together so they could watch Hopkins, chained and condemned, beg for his life. His humiliation was a lesson for every discontented settler, and when Gates felt they had learned the lesson, he granted Hopkins clemency.

Kelly goes on to note that “In 1620, Hopkins took ship again, this time in a little vessel that was going to land settlers on the Hudson River. But the Mayflower landed farther north, near Cape Cod, beyond the Virginia Company’s land grant. Someone - who could it have been other than Hopkins? - argued that as soon as the settlers set foot ashore, they would be free of their contract, free to determine for themselves their own government.”

“Under the sway of this idea, the famous Mayflower Compact created government, a ‘civil body politic,’ through the mutual consent of the 41 men who signed the new contract. It seems almost preposterous that for 400 years no one has credited Hopkins with the idea - if not the language - of that document.”

“The Mayflower Compact and a spectacular, three-day Thanksgiving feast have come to symbolize ingenuity, industry, and self-determination. The authoritarian and puritanical Pilgrims, so the story goes, might have been staid and a little boring, but their governing was sober, orderly, and successful.”

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Use this link for a presentation by Joseph Kelly to the Boston Athenæum: <https://vimeo.com/303531775>

Stephen Hopkins Was the Only Mayflower Passenger that Had Been to America Before

Stephen Hopkins is believed to have been born April 30, 1581 in the Hampshire village of Upper Clatford, near Southampton. Shortly after his birth and baptism, his family moved to Winchester.

By 1603/4, Hopkins was married to Mary and living in Hursley, Hampshire. The couple had three children - Elizabeth (born 1603), Constance (1606) and Giles (1607) - who were all baptized there.

While it is very likely that several, if not all of the Mayflower crew had been to America before, only one of the Mayflower passengers had been to Jamestown before going to Plymouth, Stephen Hopkins.



The Sea Venture and other boats associated with that storm were part of the Third Resupply headed to Jamestown.

Hopkins remained in Jamestown for four years but returned to England in 1614 after learning of the death of his wife.

In 1617, he married Elizabeth Fisher at St Mary Matfellow Church in Whitechapel, London, and the following year the couple had a daughter they named Damaris.

Hopkins worked as a tanner and merchant, and was recruited by the Company of Merchant Adventurers of London to provide governance for Plymouth Colony and to assist with its ventures.

When he learned of the Pilgrims' planned voyage to Northern Virginia, Hopkins paid for his and his family's passage, together with two servants - Edward Doty and Edward Leister. They sailed on the Mayflower.



The couple took with them Constance, Giles and Damaris but did not pay for his eldest daughter Elizabeth, so it is assumed she had died.

And if the transatlantic crossing wasn't dangerous enough, Elizabeth gave birth while at sea to a son whom they named Oceanus.

Shortly after arriving in North America, Hopkins was one of the Pilgrims who signed the Mayflower Compact and went on to become an active member of the community, presumably as a result of his years spent in Jamestown.

Indeed, his experience was vital in the Pilgrims' early expeditions, and he was considered something of an "expert" on Native Americans for the first few contacts.

While out exploring, Hopkins is said to have recognized and identified an Indian deer trap. And when Samoset walked into Plymouth and welcomed the English, he was housed in Stephen Hopkins' house for the night.

Stephen was also sent on several of the ambassadorial missions to meet with the various Indian groups in the region.

Over the years, he assisted Pilgrim leaders including Myles Standish and Edward Winslow.

He and Elizabeth also had five more children, named Caleb, Deborah, Ruth, Damaris (in honor of their first daughter who died) and Elizabeth.

Hopkins is believed to have died in the summer of 1644, but the location of his burial is unknown. (Caleb Johnson; Mayflower400UK-org)

Information here is from A True Reportory of the Wreck and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates, William Strachey; HurriganScience-org; How The Survivor Of A 1609 Shipwreck Brought Democracy To America, Joseph Kelly; Caleb Johnson; Mayflower400UK-org.

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young