

July Column

The Castaways

Last month I mentioned the importance of adding your family histories/stories to your research, for your own enjoyment as well as for future generations. It doesn't matter what the stories/history is about, what matters is that it is written and important to the family. These histories, breathe life into the stories of the past, telling of adventurous spirits, everyday life, and historical moments. Such was the case of my great grandfather Sir Thomas Gates who was shipwrecked on the deserted Island of Bermuda in 1609.

On a recent holiday to Williamsburg, Virginia, I came across a published account that verified our research on my 9th great grandfather, Thomas Gates. The account is published in a book titled "A Brave Vessel" written by Hobson Woodward. The author uses source material left behind by writer and secretary to the Colony, William Strachey who was aboard the ship "Sea Venture". Strachey made detailed notes on the ships voyage and wreck on Bermuda and the eventual arrival to Virginia, sailing into Jamestown Colony.

Thomas Gates was appointed to lead the third supply to the Jamestown Colony, Virginia in 1609. Previously on behalf of England, Gates had accompanied explorer Sir Frances Drake to the Caribbean and South America to raid Spanish settlements. Gates had fought the Spanish at Cadiz and was knighted for his service in 1596. In 1604 he fought in the Dutch wars, and four years later was granted leave to lead the 1609 expedition to Jamestown and take command of the colony as its Governor.

The fleet of ships, consisting of 7 supply ships and one schooner left England on June 08, 1609 bound for Jamestown, Virginia. Aboard the lead ship, "Sea Venture" were 150 passengers, consisting of tradespeople and dignitaries including, Admiral George Somers, commander of the fleet, William Strachey the new secretary, and Thomas Gates the new Governor. The uneventful trip came to an end on the evening of July 24th when the ship sailed into the stormy charcoal cloud bank. Little did they know, they had entered a raging "hurricano of the West Indies". The hurricane winds, torrents of rain, and the crashing waves caused much stress to the Sea Venture. Soon the sailors discovered that the fiber

caulking between the planks of the ship were beginning to loosen, allowing sea water to flood the hold of the Sea Venture.

Thomas Gates immediately ordered pumping and bailing of sea water. Crews were organized to search the ship for the cause of the leak, but none were found. Admiral Somers took control of the ship's helm and stayed there for 3 straight days without food or little sleep. The ship filled with water and the passengers thought they were going to drown, with water over 5 feet deep in the hold of the ship. On the morning of the 4th day in the hurricane, Somers sighted land, and in order to save the ship from sinking, sailed the ship towards the Island. Suddenly the ship hit a reef hidden in the swirling, rough waves, wedging it tightly between two outcrops of coral reef. Two small boats aboard the Sea Venture were lowered and used to ferry all of the passengers to the shore $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile away.

The Sea Venture was wrecked on the reefs of the deserted Island of Bermuda. Quickly the ship was stripped of all its remaining supplies, even the sails and planks were brought ashore to be used later. Once on shore fresh water from the rain, palmetto berries, cactus pears and a plentiful supply of fresh fish soon eased the hunger caused by the tumultuous 4 day ride through the hurricane. Wild hogs left by a Spanish sea captain 45 years earlier had multiplied into large herds, thus providing a good source of meat for the castaways.

Thomas Gates made full use of all the castaway's talents and qualifications, he instructed the carpenters to begin building two small sea worthy schooners large enough to transport all of the group. Gates desire to reach the Jamestown colony never diminished, as he felt obligated to fulfill the contract to the London Virginia Company by bringing all the passengers to Virginia.

A dispute arose between Somers and Gates over who had authority, while still on the Island and not in Virginia. In the end it was Thomas Gates who ultimately commanded the rag tag group of castaways safely to Virginia, ten months later in May of 1610.

This is just a short extract from my story of the life of my 9th great. Grandfather Sir Thomas Gates. Without Genealogy, our family would not have known anything about this amazing story. Here's to you and your "Ancestral Stories".

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Sources: A Brave Vessel by Hobson Woodward

Jamestown History Center, Jamestown, Virginia

Encyclopedia Britannica

U.S. History: Biographies