



CUTTYHUNK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## MONOGRAPH

# BARTHOLOMEW GOSNOLD (1571–1607): NEW WORLD ADVENTURER

Bartholomew Gosnold, honored explorer of the Massachusetts coast in 1602, is in the limelight as Jamestown, his next stop, celebrates 400 years of settlement. Born to the gentry in 1571 near Ipswich, Gosnold lived a life of intrigue at a turning point in English history.

“patents” to explore, colonize and/or have rights to exports from specific areas demarcated by latitude and longitude. Each patent included a time limit by which a permanent colony had to be established. Subterfuge surrounded the use of these patents, which were difficult to obtain and protect.



*The Armada portrait of Queen Elizabeth I, attributed to Gower c. 1588. (Courtesy of Otley Hall Guidebook.)*

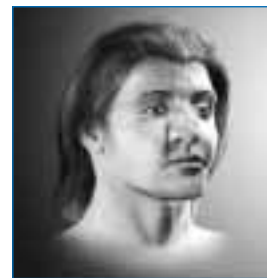
England, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, emerged as ruler of the sea after defeating the Spanish Armada in 1588. On land Gosnold, through blood and education, was a mover and shaker. According to his chief biographer Walter Gookin, by marrying Mary Golding in 1592, Gosnold “became a princeling of a regal

house of merchant-adventurers,” led by Mary’s wealthy cousin, Sir Thomas Smythe, founder of the East India Company. Gosnold had begun to associate with fellow risk takers while a student at Cambridge University. After a stint at royally-sanctioned privateering against the Spanish in 1596–97, he eventually positioned himself to captain a ship to the New World.

Sailing skill was never an issue for the island nation. Fisherman had ventured across the Atlantic for centuries. Early English explorers included John Cabot, who named New Found Land in 1497, and the many other seekers of a Northwest Passage to Asia. Sir Walter Drake circumnavigated the world in 1587–90. Maps and journals described the temperate region suited for settlement, first called Noremberga (1524). Sir Walter Raleigh later named this New World’s east coast Virginia after Queen Elizabeth, “the Virgin Queen,” in the 1580s.

Merchant-explorers scrambled to make arrangements to stake their claims and establish permanent colonies. Individuals applied to the Queen for

In 1585 Queen Elizabeth I granted her pet Sir Walter Raleigh a “most ample” patent for “all lands that the Spanish did not hold outright or could not defend”—essentially land stretching from Florida to Canada. Raleigh, a bold privateer and businessman, spent tens of thousands of pounds from 1584 to 1602 in efforts to establish colonies, including Roanoke. His fate turned when his protector, Queen Elizabeth, died in 1602. Raleigh tried to subvert the reign of her successor, King James, and spent the next 13 years in the Tower of London. This interfered, to say the least, with his ventures, and his Virginia colonization patent expired.



*Digital facial reconstruction from skull found recently at Jamestown and thought to be Gosnold’s, by Keith Kasnot.*

Bartholomew Gosnold truly was in the right place, with the right connections, at the right time. Admitted to practice law in 1592 at the Middle Temple — with colleagues Raleigh and Drake — Gosnold enjoyed after-dinner entertainment such as Shakespeare’s plays and lectures by Sir Richard Hakluyt. Hakluyt, geographer to the Queen and an active promoter

of colonization, spurred Gosnold’s career change to New World explorer. In 1600 his *Principal Navigations of the English Nation* publicized narratives of merchant-adventurers and ignited great excitement.

As an aside, there are echoes of *The Da Vinci Code*, in that the Middle Temple lawyers may have had ties to the Knights Templar, a group that included past



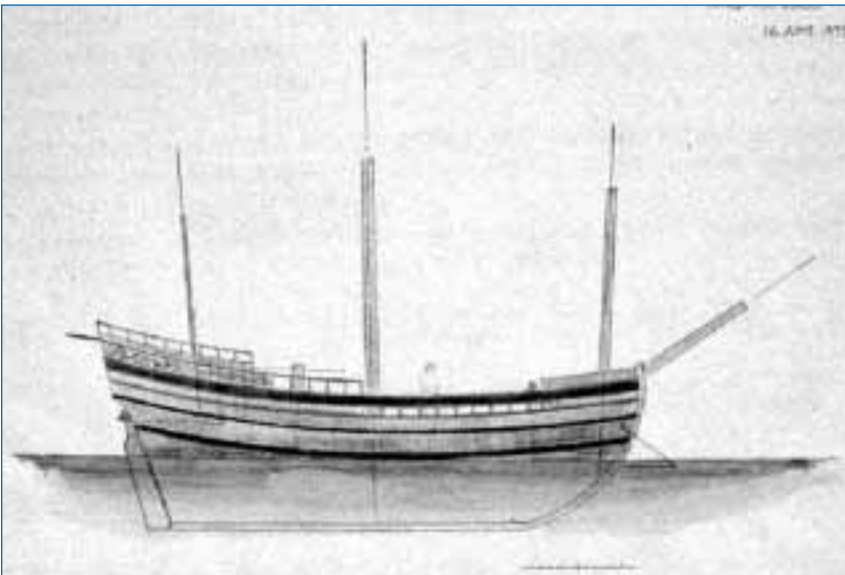
*Henry Wriothesley, the 3rd Earl of Southampton.*  
(Courtesy of Otley Hall Guidebook.)

and future explorers, such as the Portuguese sailor Giovanni da Verrazano who sailed along and mapped the east coast in 1524. The merchant seamen who were Templars are said to have used fishmongers as fronts, as they hid their money and treasure from the Crown. Some say Gosnold wanted to find Refugio, Verrazano's supposedly Knights Templar settlement on Narragansett Bay, and plant a trading post there.

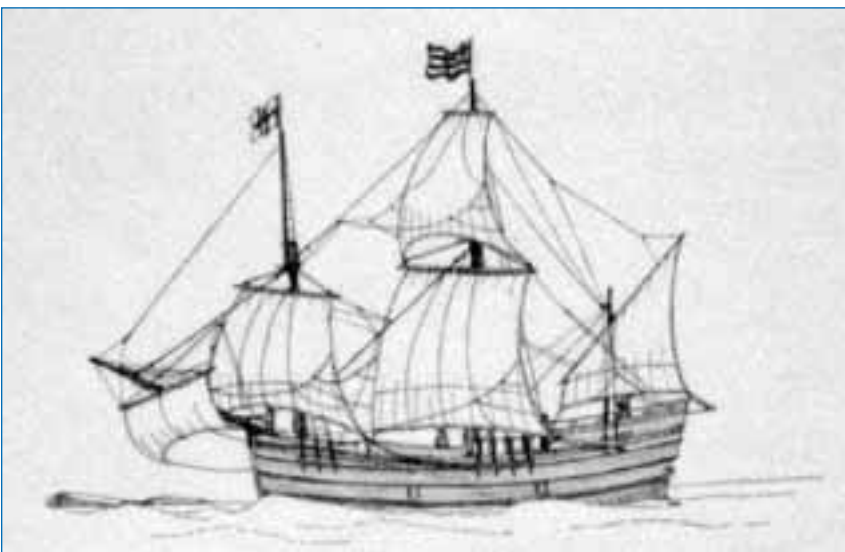
After Hakluyt, Gosnold's second vital comrade was the wealthy Henry Wriothesley, third Earl of Southampton, who was also a patron of Shakespeare. The story goes that Gosnold's enthusiasm for exploration and the Earl's quest for renown and gold brought the two men together, and the first voyage

was funded. Gosnold would need to collect much New World treasure to offset the heavy expenses of the journey. Of course this meant gold, if it could be found. But he would settle for furs and sassafras — especially sassafras, a wonder drug believed to cure syphilis and obtainable only in the New World.

Finally, Gosnold located the essential patent, ship and captain in his third key player, Bartholomew Gilbert. Gilbert had tenuous access to a soon-to-expire, unexercised patent. This colorful man was infamous for trying to sell to the Queen a huge diamond captured in a privateering raid on the Spanish Main. His 1602 voyage with Gosnold on the *Concord* — a leaky ship only about 13 paces long and six wide — would be among his last. In 1603, Raleigh sent Gilbert to Chesapeake, where natives killed him.



*Two drawings of the Concord by William Avery Baker.*  
(Courtesy of New Bedford Whaling Museum online archives.)



And so it was that the 32-year-old Gosnold set sail from Falmouth on the bark *Concord* for North Virginia in March 1602. Crammed on board were 32 people, including 20 would-be-settlers for a colony/trading post. Among the passengers were the journal writers John Brereton, a chaplain, and lawyer Gabriel Archer, linked by “bonds of adolescent comradeship” to Gosnold from shared student days at Cambridge. John Martin, a goldsmith, was also aboard, along with herbalist Robert Meriton who would be able to identify sassafras.

Carrying Verrazano's maps (printed by Hakluyt) of the east coast, Gosnold set the course. He chose the shorter route to Virginia by turning west from the Azores to avoid both the tropical heat and Spanish sailors to the south. The *Concord* landed first on the southern coast of Maine, then sailed south to Provincetown. Gosnold is credited with naming Cape Cod, for the plentiful cod he saw, and with mapping the bay that would one day be the site of the *Mayflower's* landing. Although he did not happen upon Refugio, he did find and name Elizabeth's Isle — today's Cuttyhunk and Nashawena, which were joined at the time — probably after Queen Elizabeth. Martha's Vineyard took its name from Gosnold's wife's grandmother, Martha Golding (and his infant daughter who died in 1598), who urged the English creation of a new nation in the New World.

The explorers set about building a fort on a small island, probably in Cuttyhunk's West End pond. Highlights of their stay included visits with Wampanoags, sprouting of seeds in noticeably fertile soil, and Archer's and Brereton's extensive inventory of flora and fauna. After just three weeks, however, the crew decided to return to England.

To focus the inquiry on why the *Concord* departed the shores of Elizabeth's Isle would limit the portrait of Bartholomew Gosnold. In short, circumstances were not right. Scholars sense that the settlers were squeamish — about the natives, about whether Captain Gilbert would return as originally planned with resupplies from England, and even about Gosnold who had overstayed on an excursion to Penikese. Archer wrote about “the want of our Captain, that promised to return...struck in us a dumpish terror,” whereupon those who had expected to remain had second thoughts. The *Concord* headed home to England with a cargo of one ton of harvested sassafras, 26 cedar timbers, a collection of furs, and a captured native canoe.

Gosnold, his crew healthy and the *Concord* intact — both notable accomplishments at the time — faced minor challenges upon his summer return to England. Raleigh claimed a major infringement of his export patent after investigating a sudden drop in London market prices for sassafras. The 1605 play “Eastward Ho!” satirized the voyage of a Gosnold-like Captain Seagull. Author Ben Johnson was jailed for tasteless — to King James — humor about backers’ gold fever and foolish explorers.

Hakluyt published Brereton’s “Briefe and True” account of the voyage and recommendations for future settlements. Researchers today theorize that boring passages were deleted and others exaggerated so as to enthruse potential backers and attract explorers. With King James eager for economic ventures, momentum increased. Between the English, French and Dutch, at least one vessel crossed the Atlantic to the New World annually from 1602–1620.

Meanwhile, Cuttyhunk was left to the Wampanoags who had learned a bit more about the occasional visitors bearing straw hats and trinkets, while they shared tobacco and traded furs. Cuttyhunk was without permanent inhabitants until Ralph Earle, Jr., settled in 1688.



Back home in England, Gosnold now played the charismatic ringleader. With his brother Anthony, his cousin Edward Maria Wingfield, loyal friend Gabriel Archer, and newcomer John Smith, Gosnold planned the ultimate voyage. Lore of the Gosnold family manor, Otley Hall, says he used the hearthside as a recruiting base and interviewed eager prospective settlers and crew (all men and boys). Archer signed on again, as did John Martin who brought along his son and cousin, all goldsmiths. Smith later wrote that Gosnold was adept



“at drawing others in.” Indeed, he was a prime instigator of the Jamestown venture.

The Earl of Southampton, still in search of glory and gold, again backed the expedition. King James in 1606 granted two exclusive charters: the Virginia Company of Plymouth got the lands extending south from modern Maine to the Potomac River; and the Virginia Company of London got lands north from Cape Fear to the Hudson River. Colonies would have to be at least 100 miles apart. The Spanish intercepted the ship of the Plymouth group, which set out again and started the short-lived Popham Colony in Maine a year later. Clearly, colonization faced multiple obstacles but Gosnold avoided them by some combination of skill and luck.

Gosnold, vice-admiral of the London fleet, captained the *Godspeed*, one of three ships that left for the Chesapeake area of Virginia in December 1606. After an arduous voyage, the ships landed in Jamestown in April 1607. A member of the original governing council, Gosnold was described in a 1614 account as a “brave soldier and very ingenious.” He helped build a fort that was strategically well-placed, but was on swampy land with poor drinking water. Gosnold died of dysentery and malnutrition on August 22, 1607, aged 36. By the first winter only 50 colonists (of the original 144) survived.

*“Bartholomew Gosnold at Cuttyhunk”, painting by Albert Bierstadt. (Courtesy of New Bedford Whaling Museum online archives)*

*Edward Maria Wingfield, Jamestown’s first governor, lamented the death of “the worthy and religious gentleman, Captain Bartholomew Gosnold, upon whose life stood a great part of the good success and fortune of our government and colony.”*

*August 1607*

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Archer fared somewhat better. He served as secretary of Jamestown for a year, returned to England in 1608, and came back to Jamestown a year later. He died during the "Starving Time," the winter of 1609-10, when the fort was under siege from natives, and food supplies were scarce.

Gosnold had provided a stabilizing influence. His death marked the beginnings of infighting that tore apart the colony. Wingfield was deposed as governor and ultimately was replaced by John Smith. A leader by nature and something of a self-promoter, Smith has gone down in the history books as the bright light in the disaster that was the early Jamestown colony.

Because Gosnold died in the first months of settlement, few contemporary visitors to Jamestown are likely to have heard of him. Instead, John Smith's statue stands on a pedestal, looking out over the James River, with Pocahontas' statue nearby, her bronzed hands shiny from being held by visitors. Just outside the recently discovered remains of the fort is a small stone cross believed to mark the grave of Bartholomew Gosnold. Neither DNA from the remains uncovered in 2005 nor tooth analysis has been conclusive, but most agree that the 5' 6" skeleton is undoubtedly that of the captain. A decorative staff found along the coffin lid meshes with a report that he was buried with full honors.

Though markedly less hospitable than Cuttyhunk, Jamestown — with mosquitoes, hostile natives, food shortages, and diseases — held fast and became the first permanent English colony. Discord and dreadful deaths marred the early years.

Jamestown did not thrive until the 1640s. Gosnold had set in motion the impulse for colonization that played out in the founding of an English-speaking nation on the shores of the New World. By 1670, England had established settlements in 12 of what would become the 13 original colonies. Described by Gookin as a "persistent salesman and devoted propagandist," Gosnold made possible what others had planned.

If measured by place names on maps and statues at historic sites, Gosnold's lasting recognition might be considered minimal. The town of Gosnold, encompassing all of the Elizabeth Islands, is the smallest in Massachusetts. When incorporated in 1864, the town had only 16 voters, one-half the number of the passengers aboard the *Concord* in 1602.

A cobble monument to the explorer and his companions was built in 1902 on a small island, believed to be the site of their fort, in a pond on Elizabeth's Isle. This sturdy 70-foot tower stands tall, a fitting tribute to Gosnold's determination and skills.

LOUISE GARFIELD BACHLER AND  
ALLISON THURSTON

*Allison Thurston, in researching Captain Gosnold for the summer 2007 exhibit, Bartholomew Gosnold: Cuttyhunk to Jamestown, 1602-1607, reviewed many electronic and traditional sources in an effort to more fully understand Gosnold and his circles. CHS is grateful to Allie for her diligence and enthusiasm, traits she shares with Gosnold.*



*The monument to Gosnold and his companions who built the first English habitation on the coast of New England in 1602. Built on Cuttyhunk in 1902-03 by the Old Dartmouth Historical Society. (CHS collection.)*



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