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Cape Henry: Spiritual Roots of a Nation
By Craig von Buseck

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But this prophetic moment in time came, in part, as a result of more than half a century of labor and prayer by another Englishman – an Anglican priest who was also one of the world’s leading experts on exploration. His name was Richard Hakluyt.

Born in 1552, and orphaned at a young age, Hakluyt became the ward of his older cousin of the same name. The elder Richard Hakluyt was a lawyer and a noted geographer who helped pave the way for the lad to become a Queen’s Scholar at Westminster school.

While there, Hakluyt visited his elder cousin, who had a passion for navigation and cosmography. As young Richard explored the home, he discovered books and maps lying open in the study. The elder Hakluyt noticed his interest and began explaining the ways of exploration – opening the eyes of the younger to the exciting study of ocean travel and worldwide exploration.
Later the younger Hakluyt would write of his learned cousin:

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His enthusiasm for “certain books of cosmography … and the Bible” so enthralled the younger Hakluyt that he determined to “prosecute that knowledge, and kind of literature.” Enrolling at Christ Church in Oxford, “his exercises of duty first performed,” he spent the rest of his time pursuing his new-found interest in exploration – a passion that would hold his interest for the rest of his life.

His other passion was the Word of God and the Church.

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Over time, he began to realize the importance of a permanent English settlement in the New World. In 1497, John Cabot discovered and claimed North America for England. But no permanent colony had been established and the continent was being explored and settled by the Spanish and the French. At the same
time, the Spanish had established a vast and prosperous empire throughout South America, Central America, Florida, Cuba, and the Philippines.

The aggressive Spanish King continually threatened an invasion of England – and had the plundered wealth of the New World with which to carry out his threat. Hakluyt knew that in order for Protestant England to be preserved, the strength of the nation needed to expand beyond the relatively tiny British Isles.

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“Preacher Hakluyt,” as he was known by friends, gathered the world’s most comprehensive collection of maps and information concerning this land called Virginia. He wrote extensively on the subject and argued his case before Queen Elizabeth I. Ironically, the queen was so focused on the threat of war from Spain that for some time she would not allow herself to consider Hakluyt’s arguments.

In 1578, she was finally persuaded and granted a private patent to Sir Humphrey Gilbert, the brother of Sir Walter Raleigh – the man who named the vast territory Virginia in her honor. But Gilbert died when his ship sank off the coast of Newfoundland in 1583. Elizabeth then granted a patent to Raleigh, who sponsored five expeditions to Roanoke Island in modern-day North Carolina.

All of the Raleigh expeditions ended in failure. The final tragedy became known as the 'lost colony' of Roanoke – 110 men, women, and children who mysteriously disappeared without a trace. When King James came to the throne, Raleigh lost favor and eventually was imprisoned and executed.
Richard Hakluyt sensed that the time was right to once again make his case before the royal court. He gathered a group of like-minded merchants and explorers to form the Virginia Company. The group received an audience with King James I, a serious and scholarly monarch, committed to the Christian faith and the future of the newly united kingdom.

The new king looked favorably upon their request and worked with the Virginia Company to draft a charter for the endeavor. The chief writer for the charter was Richard Hakluyt.

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We greatly commend and graciously accept their desires for the furtherance of so noble a work, which may, by the providence of Almighty God, hereafter tend to the glory of His Divine Majesty, in propagating of Christian religion to such people as yet live in darkness and miserable ignorance of the true knowledge and worship of God and may in time bring the infidels and savages living in those parts to human civility and a settled, quiet government.

Along with the expansion of the kingdom, and the search for natural resources and gold to build the empire, a major aspect of the stated mission of the Virginia Company included concern for spiritual things. This priority was presented in a tract published by the group titled, ‘A True Declaration of the State of Virginia’:

First, to preach and baptize into Christian religion and by the propagation of the Gospel, to recover out of the arms of the devil a number of poor and miserable souls wrapped up into death in almost invincible ignorance; to endeavor the fulfilling and accomplishments of the number of the elect which shall be gathered from out of all corners of the earth; and to add to our myte the treasury of heaven.
The British saw this missionary aspect of the endeavor as a way to extend to others the same gospel message that came to them. In the days of Roman conquest, the native Britons were a group of loosely-organized tribes, similar to the Native American peoples. The civilizing effect of Roman law and later Christian religion had lifted the British people and made them a mighty nation.

“Why, what injury can it be to people of any nation for Christians to come unto their ports, havens, or territories,” wrote colonist William Strachey, “when the law of nations, which is the law of God and man, doth privilege all men to do so?” The Virginia colonists were doing for the natives what others had done for them centuries before.

On December 20, 1605, 105 settlers and 40 seamen set out from the river Thames in England in three small wooden vessels – the Susan Constant, the Godspeed, and the Discovery. Richard Hakluyt would not realize his dream of seeing Virginia. He was too old and too valuable of an advisor to the king to allow on the perilous journey. Instead, his dear friend, Rev. Robert Hunt, would join the expedition as the spiritual leader.

After a difficult journey, that included the death of one of the colonists in the Caribbean, and the imprisonment of a soldier named Captain John Smith – on dubious charges of mutiny that were later dismissed – many of the colonists had nearly given up hope of ever arriving in the New World. Then on April 26, after enduring a violent thunderstorm that caused the sailors to bring down their sails, the colonists finally saw land in the distance.

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Before permitting the settlers to continue with the work of looking for a permanent home, Rev. Hunt required that each of the colonists wait on the ships for three days in a time of personal examination and
repentance. The journey had been filled with difficulty and in-fighting among the colonists. If they were to consecrate the land for God's purposes, Hunt wanted the company to be contrite in heart.

Though the ships they sailed upon were very small, The Virginia Company leadership insisted that they carry one item with them from England for the purpose of giving glory to God in the endeavor – a rough-hewn wooden cross. After the three days had passed, Hunt led the party to the wind-swept shore where they erected the seven-foot oak cross in the sand.

The colonists and sailors gathered around the cross, holding the first formal prayer service in Virginia to give thanksgiving for God's mercy and grace in bringing them safely to this new land. As they knelt in the sand, Hunt reminded them of the admonition of the British Royal Council, taken from the Holy Scripture: “Every plantation, which my Heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up.”

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Jamestown became the first successful and permanent English colony. The first Protestant church services were held there by Robert Hunt under an old sail until the first church building was erected. In Jamestown, colonists came together for prayer three times a day and the church was at the center of the town. It was also
the site of the first representative government in North America, the Virginia General Assembly, which is now the third oldest continuous legislature in the world.

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