

This short sketch is adapted from an ongoing project to illuminate, personalize, and contextualize the lives of a few individuals from my family history. The eventual goal is to bring these stories together in a book that places them in the historical events they participated in without glossing over or sanitizing anything.

My Ancestor the Clown

By Brook Ellingwood

His name was Stephen Hopkins, but he was the inspiration for a clown named “Stephano.”

Stephano is a loudmouthed drunk, filled with ridiculous ideas and spreading treasonous thoughts. Butler to the king and bolstered by drink, he schemes with the king’s jester and persuades a native of the island which they are marooned that he is a brave god bearing celestial liquor. The life of the real Stephen was just as remarkable, including his long years after the event that Stephano’s existence lampoons.

Some miniscule amount of Stephen Hopkin’s DNA may have made it to me through my father. Perhaps it is the bit that fueled my interest in the Italian Commedia dell’Arte, from which the clownish aspect of Stephano is derived. Perhaps it is why I once auditioned for Ringling Brothers Clown College and was encouraged to attend by the Head Clown. Perhaps it is where I get my instinctual distrust of self-important authority and my occasional delusions of grandeur.

Honestly I’m almost disappointed the clown Stephano isn’t my ancestor, but Stephen, his real life antecedent will have to do. That possible drop of DNA isn’t from a fictional butler leading a native revolt following a fictional shipwreck on a magical island, but a tanner, merchant, clerk, and brewer who nearly got himself executed after an actual shipwreck.

The *Sea Venture* sailed in 1609 carrying relief supplies and people. It was the first ship the English ship built with the intent to carry people as well as good. Later, British slave ships would carry unwilling cargo but the *Sea Venture*’s cargo was willing emigrants headed to join the colony at Jamestown, Virginia. Getting there proved more challenging than anticipated.

Jamestown was some 15 miles downstream from where the Appomattox River passes Conjurers Neck and joins the James River. In its first few years the colony was an ongoing disaster, saved from being a truly first-class debacle only because the earlier completely failure of the Roanoke colony and disappearance of all its colonists had claimed that title.

The backers of the Jamestown colony failed to provide it with adequate resources, but they did provide it with far too many gentlemen of wealth and their manservants. The bulk of the colonists had little idea what to do with the resources they did have.

As a result, within a few months of Jamestown’s 1607 founding 80% of the colonists were dead. Others had abandoned it and taken up with local tribes of the Powhatan Confederacy. The inept wretches still barely living inside Jamestown’s walls must have been much cheered when relief ships arrived with supplies and more colonists.

The new settlers included a number of craftsmen, makers of soap, glass, lumber, and various other things that London desired, but Jamestown needed less than it needed a good meal. Rather than being helpful additions, these craftsmen were just more mouths needing to

be fed from food that the colonists were incapable of growing and the local tribes of the Powhatan Confederacy were unwilling to trade.

The investors did better the next time. They put together a much larger relief mission, consisting of seven lesser ships and a newly-built flagship, the *Sea Venture*.

Most of the relief supplies were loaded onto the *Sea Venture*, along with 150 people and a dog. One of those people was my Stephen Hopkins.

Then he, and everyone else on the *Sea Venture*, got sidetracked.

The wreck of the *Sea Venture* is the event that inspired the setting of Shakespeare's last play, *The Tempest*, in which Prospero conjures up a ship-wrecking storm that he might regain his rightful title as Duke of Milan. So, you can see that William took a few liberties with the actual story.

The *Sea Venture* was pounded by a hurricane for 44 hours. She was separated from the rest of the fleet and presumed lost. Badly damaged, she spent three days after the storm taking on water before the captain spotted land. He ran her aground on purpose, saving all the people on board. And the dog. But they were nowhere near Virginia.

The passengers and crew of the *Sea Venture* were marooned on Bermuda.

Surely Bermuda must be one of the more pleasant places in the world to be marooned, especially if you have a whole ship's worth of supplies to help you make the best of it. Unlike Georgetown it didn't even have pesky inhabitants already living there. But it did have wild boar, thanks to early Spanish visitors.

The shipwrecked survivors began cutting down trees and building two new ships. It seems, despite the charms of Bermuda, their leaders still really wanted to get to Virginia with as little delay as possible.

Stephen didn't see it that way. He saw no reason the shipwrecked colonists shouldn't take their time enjoying the good food and easy living in Bermuda, only continuing to Virginia when they got tired of island life. In this way he would live the rest of his life as an adventurer.

After being ratted out by the fellows he tried to enlist in his mutiny, he was sentenced to death. But when he was pleading for his life, Stephen suddenly switched from would-be adventurer to devoted family man. He begged for clemency, citing the wife and three children he left behind in England. The people fell for it, and convinced the governor to let him live.

Exactly 356 years before I was born, Stephen finally reached Jamestown.

Remarkably, the story of Stephen's involvement in the early British colonization of America was just beginning. This would-be mutineer eventually ended up back in England and was recruited to sail on the *Mayflower* as that batch of colonists' designated New World expert. He became the only person to have settled in both Jamestown and Plymouth. But that's a tale for another time.