

Modern Version of Two Letters from Virginia

[John Pory to Sir Dudley Carleton, 1619]

All our wealth comes from tobacco. One man, by himself, was able to raise enough tobacco to earn 200 pounds sterling [a huge amount of money for the time, like earning \$200,000]. Another person with six servants was able to get 1000 pounds sterling from his tobacco crop. While such examples are rare, they are true and show that such wealth is possible. I should have said our main source of wealth is servants. We have to pay all their expenses, like food and clothes. But if they survive, they are good workers.

Just so you know that we are not the poorest people in the world, even Jamestown's cowkeeper [a low paying job] dresses in red silk clothes. And the wife of a man who was only a coal miner in England has a beaver hat with a hatband made of pearls. She wears this hat with her expensive silk dress.

[Richard Frethorne to his parents, 1623]

Loving and kind Father and Mother, I hope to God you are healthy as I am. I am writing to let you know how awful I feel about being in Virginia, a place which causes sickness.

We must work hard from morning until night for watery soup and a mouthful of bread and beef. A mouthful of bread from a penny loaf must be shared by four people. You would understand our sad and unfortunate situation if you could hear the people crying day and night like I do. They pray they were in England and would be willing to cut off an arm or a leg to get there—even if they had to beg from door to door. I have nothing, not even a shirt on my back. I wear rags, not clothes. I have underwear, stockings, shoes, and a hat, but no change of clothes. One of the fellows I work with stole my cloak. But even as he died, he refused to tell me what he had done with it.

I am eight times weaker than I was in England and all because I never have enough to eat. I swear that I used to eat more in a day at home than I am allowed to eat in a week here.

Oh, I wish you could see how I constantly sigh, groan, cry, and beat my breast. Like holy Job [a figure in the Bible known for the suffering he endured], I regret and curse my birth. I thought no human head could hold the amount of water [tears] I see daily flowing from my eyes.