

Roanoke: The Real History of the Lost Colony & How Its Legend Haunts Pop Culture

American Horror Story season 6 has made the Roanoke mystery its central theme. We look at its real history and influence on pop culture.

[David Crow](#) November 17, 2016

In case you missed it, the **American Horror Story** season 6 has been all about a bloody "Roanoke Nightmare." After promoting the new season without releasing a single frame of footage, the ever cryptic Ryan Murphy unveiled his "true crime" satire-meets-American Gothic to a surprised public last September, leading many to wonder... what is "Roanoke," again?

In fact, several publications (who will go unnamed) initially asserted that the name infamously tied to the words "Lost Colony" was made up for the series, and that this fictional ghost story was set in Virginia (Roanoke is in present day North Carolina). But rest assured, Roanoke is a real place, and the ghost stories around it are every bit as strange—if not stranger—than anything **American Horror Story** has dreamed up. The legend of the Lost Colony has persisted for over 400 years and will likely continue to leave scholars confounded about what really happened on those soggy Outer Banks shores so many centuries ago... it also will likely continue cropping up in movies and TV shows as an ever-elastic basis for imaginative hocus pocus.

So while **American Horror Story: Roanoke** might be done, now is the time to join us as we examine the real history of Roanoke, and how its legend has

evolved in media as varied as comic books to anthological TV shows.



The Real Colony of Roanoke

A small barrier island that is only eight miles in length, Roanoke rests on the northern coastal tip of North Carolina. Wet but seemingly fertile, the island was *not* the first choice of John White, the governor of the colony, when he and his settlement of 117 souls—97 men, 17 women, and nine boys—made landfall in July 1587. After all, it had already been the site of a previous colony that was lost to dangerous forces.

While the White Colony is viewed as the first serious attempt by the English to place a permanent foothold in the New World (Spain was already plundering plenty further south), it was in actuality the culmination of nearly a decade of false starts. Queen Elizabeth I originally granted a patent to one Sir Humphrey Gilbert in 1578 to discover “remote, heathen and barbarous” lands not held by any Christian ruler or people. In other words, if Spain hasn’t set foot there yet, call dibs as quick as you can!

Unfortunately for Gilbert, that ended abruptly in a shipwreck during his second expedition to the New World. After his death, half-brother Walter Raleigh took over the patent that included potential tracts of land that spanned all the way from Spanish Florida to the arctic. Prior to John White’s doomed decision to set up residency in Roanoke, the barrier islands proved very attractive to parties sponsored by Raleigh, who never himself stepped foot in North America.

Conversely, White was on the first of Raleigh’s two earlier charters to Roanoke, the second of which ended in another “lost colony” of sorts. That eventual bloodbath was headed by Sir Richard Grenville in name, but led to

infamy by the hawkish Ralph Lane. For in 1585, Grenville transported a military force onto Roanoke to set up a fort before returning home for supplies. Following the previous expedition, Englishmen had initially positive relations with nearby Native Americans, including the Roanoke and Croatan tribes, both of whom had representatives travel with White to England to meet Elizabeth's court: they were named Wanchese and Manteo.

The friendly tidings did not last.



Lane would lead two separate, bloody warpaths against Native American villages over a matter of months. Local hostilities became so violent, with attacks on the fort, that when England's beloved Sir Francis Drake passed by as a literal ship in the night, Lane and his men abandoned Roanoke—including three poor bastards on an expedition in the woods—to the Natives and caught the big boat home. By the time Grenville returned, he found the Lane Colony abandoned, and three Christian souls vanished. So he left *another* 15 men behind to defend the remnants of his failed enterprise with two years-worth of food before high-tailing it back to England. No white man ever saw the fightin' 15 alive again.

Hence, when the White Colony landed in Roanoke to pick up those 15 and found only the remains of what was a massacre, they had little reason to want to stay. Unfortunately, ship Capt. Simon Fernandez forced White to abandon his initial plan to sail further north and place a settlement in Chesapeake Bay, which in modern day Virginia would eventually become the site of the first successful English colony, Jamestown. Instead, White and company were compelled to set up shop and repair relations with the locals as fast as possible... especially since colonist George Howe was killed a brief *nine days* after landing by American Indians while crabbing along the shoreline.

White, unlike Lane, at least temporarily soothed relations by having Manteo, who was now the first Native American to be baptized as a Protestant, make peace between the colony and the Croatans, his native tribe living on Hatteras Island. Intriguingly, Wanchese went a different way than Manteo, souring toward the English as an invading force. Legend has it he even participated in the force that killed Grenville's Unlucky 15.

In the meantime, White's colony seemed to be able to flourish where Lane's failed. Unlike Lane, White led a group of families that were not employees; they each had a grant, and thus a stake, in the success of this grand enterprise. White, originally an artist himself on his first expedition who drew maps and paintings of locals, even had the bragging rights of being the grandfather to the first Protestant soul born in the New World. A literal face for America's future promise.

Virginia Dare was born on Aug. 18, 1587 to White's daughter Eleanor Dare and Ananias Dare. Yet, on Aug. 27, White left his colony, daughter, and newborn granddaughter for England because the colonists arrived too late to plant crops and desperately needed new supplies. The governor departed with the hopes of being back for winter in the New Year—he didn't return for three winters. By the time he stepped foot again in Roanoke on Aug. 18, 1590, the 117 colonists had vanished like ghosts. His granddaughter would've been three-years-old, to the day.



How Were They Lost?

John White desperately wished to return to Roanoke and his family. But due to the burgeoning war between Elizabeth's England and the Spanish Armada, White couldn't mount a successful sea voyage for years. By the time he returned, the fort was overgrown with grass and roots, guns lay

strewn about across the cold ground, and chests once buried deep to protect valuables lay broken and bare, with their cherished books, pictures, and belongings withering in the sun. White had provided a coded signal to his colonists to leave in case of danger: a carved cross in a tree. However, he found two very different carvings upon his return. One tree had the letters "CRO" etched into its bark; another more explicitly read "CROATOAN."

White's personal belief, which still remains one of the most convincing, was this meant they had gone to live with Manteo's people on Croatan Island (Hatteras). However, old John never could verify that since an approaching storm forced him to protect his two ships and return home to England. He never mounted another rescue attempt and died three years later.

So what happened to the Lost Colony?



There are plenty of theories about why they vanished, including starvation, slaughter by hostile Native Americans, murder by hostile Spanish soldiers, a variety of exodus stories, or some combination of all of the above. The potentially most appealing is that the "CRO" was short for "CROATOAN," the island where the colonists were presumably forced to adapt to the Native American lifestyle.

Indeed, John Lawson, an English explorer and naturalist, wrote a century later in his 1709 work [A New Voyage to Carolina](#) that he met Croatans living on Hatteras Island who claimed to be descended from white settlers. He confirmed he believed as much due to them having gray eyes. Currently, the Lost Colony for Science and Research at Williamston is attempting to verify this by searching for arcane European/English DNA strands in the descendants of Croatans. Similarly, [East Carolina University's 1998 "The Croatan Project"](#) might have corroborated this narrative since the group

found a 10-carat gold signet ring from the 16th century on Hatteras island. Some genealogists have since claimed the lion crest on it is supposedly traceable to the Kendall coat of arms, and a Master Kendall was said to be one of the men Ralph Lane left to rot in 1586.

Conversely, others theorize that the colonists attempted to move to the much more commercially viable Chesapeake Bay (White's original destination) but were long dead by the time Jamestown was actually founded in the location. This version is heavily influenced by John Smith (famed for being supposedly saved by Pocahontas) who claimed in 1608 that Powhatan, chief of the Powhatan tribe and father of Pocahontas, said they killed white colonists, who by the turn of the century were living in modern day Virginia with a group of Chesapian Natives. William Strachey, Secretary of Jamestown from 1610 to 1611, later added to this version of events, claiming that Powhatan asserted he personally led the killings.

[Perhaps even most curious is the "Dare Stone,"](#) which was discovered in 1937 by the Chowan River and about 65 miles west of Roanoke. The stone was first believed to be authentic by several academics at Emory University in Georgia until the thirst for more stones led to 40-some forgeries between 1938 and 1941. However, modern historians have begun speculating that the original "Chowan Stone" might be authentic, such as David La Vere in [*The North Carolina Historical Review*](#).

The stone, at least, seems to have authentic Elizabethan English (unlike other blatant frauds) and provides a more believable historical record of events: the colonists moved farther west past wetlands until a horrific Native American attack in 1591 killed most of the settlers, including Ananias Dare and a four-year-old Virginia Dare. The stone acted as the last word of Eleanor Dare (signed EWD), painting a grim final portrait of the seven survivors lost in the woods.

However, there is plenty of reason to keep that stone (which has inspired dozens of hoaxes), as well as any other theory about Roanoke, as just that: a theory. One that attempts to understand the mysterious fates of those lost in America's first blind steps in the dark. Still, Roanoke can live on in many other ways... including in a vast variety of fictions!

[Click here to see how the legend has evolved from folklore to television!](#)



The Legend of Virginia Dare, the White Doe

The most famous ghost that is said to haunt the shores of North Carolina and pop culture in equal measures is the spirit of Virginia Dare... the New World's first Christian "wild child." The sweet babe likely never survived infancy, but her name is immortal. She has been the subject of numerous romance and supernatural novels, including the rather cringe-inducing 1908 book *The Daughter of Virginia Dare*, where Virginia is revealed to be the secret mother of Pocahontas (a later 1930 novel would in contrast place Virginia in a love triangle with John Smith and the teenage Pocahontas).

But the most famous legend of Dare is one from colonial North Carolinian folklore that is alleged to have been passed down for over 300 years and was eventually immortalized in Sallie Southall Cotten's long-narrative poem, *The White Doe: The Fate of Virginia Dare* (1901). [In Cotten's preface, she stresses that folklore and myth](#) are as important as actual history, and she asserts her romantic poem is the first American myth, predating chopped cherry trees and chopping headless horsemen alike.

In this version of events, Wanchese planned to slaughter the Roanoke Colony after John White's departure, but as luck would have it, Manteo gets

wind of the scheme and rescues most of the colonists before Wanchese strikes. In the aftermath, the survivors assimilate into Croatan culture, and in that natural world, Virginia Dare grows up to be an adored maiden known as *Winona-Ska*. A beauty marked by grace, Winona-Ska enchants all, including the Croatan chieftain's son, Okisko. They plan to marry, but an evil, aging witch doctor named Chico wants Winona-Ska for himself. When she rejects the latter, he transforms her into a white doe.

Armed with magical pearl arrows, Okisko subsequently intends to pierce her heart and regain her human form. Unfortunately, just as he looses his bow, Wanchese's son simultaneously seeks the glory of killing the charmed deer with an arrow of silver—one given to his father by Elizabeth I. On the fateful day, both pierce Virginia Doe's heart, transforming her back but killing her instantly. Okisko thus prays for his lover's resurrection... which occurs only on the condition that she is again turned into a doe of soft eyes and a gentle heart.

To this day, North Carolinians claim to see a white doe haunt the woods of the Outer Banks.

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Marvel 1602

Neil Gaiman took the Virginia Dare myth to heart and, most amusingly, to his wild imagination in ***Marvel 1602***. There, Roanoke is featured prominently and is never lost. Virginia Dare is even its enchanted emblem who can turn into white deer, white dogs, white horses, and occasionally a white griffin. Again, this is Neil Gaiman.

Marvel 1602 was a fascinating and underrated limited series by Gaiman and Adam Kubert that was published in 2003. Set in the twilight of Elizabethan England where the empire is chaotically transitioning from one monarch to the dastardly King James of Scotland, Gaiman conjures an amusing scenario: what if the Marvel superheroes created by Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Steve Ditko arrived during the era of Shakespeare and Marlowe, as opposed to Lennon and McCartney?

In this alternate history, Roanoke has thrived onward because a blonde haired and blue eyed Native American named "Rojhaz" came to them as they were starving during their first winter. Rojhaz convinced previously hostile Natives to share food with the colony and personally hunt on their behalf, saving all 117 lives.

It is later revealed that Rojhaz is not a Native American, but the Captain America character who got lost in a time travel stream that landed him in 1587. He has since stayed in Roanoke, helping the colonists and personally guarding Virginia Dare who takes on a blue-eyed, silver haired effervescence, representing the literal hope for America's destiny.

Indeed, this Steve Rogers comes from a dystopic United States with a politician who has made himself president for life, so Cap hopes to live up to America's full potential by righting the ship in her very first steps on

Roanoke. Consequently, Elizabethan versions of the X-Men, Fantastic Four, and Avengers all ultimately make the journey to Roanoke, helping the colony thrive and embracing the characters' undeniable American roots. At the end of the story, Charles Xavier and Reed Richards' ancient counterparts even discuss declaring Roanoke independent from England, and returning to the dormant ideals of democracy.

In this context, history is changed, and Virginia Dare does not die but finds hope for a better American future while walking into the sunset with a smitten Peter Parquagh... who had just been bitten by a strangely glowing spider. It represents wonderful potential that ***Spider-Man: 1602*** later squanders by having Virginia Dare still killed as a doe and sending Peter back to the Old World to spider-crawl around King James' London... but Neil Gaiman didn't write that story, so the less said of it, the better.



Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter

Before the ludicrous concept of Abraham Lincoln splitting vampires' heads like so many rails was a movie, it was a much better, yet equally silly, book. The 2012 film version of ***Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*** reduced the premise to its most absurd images: Lincoln wielding the proverbial axe into undead skulls.

However, the Seth Grahame-Smith novel was a little cleverer than that, after all it earned bemused praise from Doris Kearns Goodwin. Often, the book reads like a dry, hagiographic biography of Lincoln before occasionally bursting into a supernatural, vampire thriller. The rest of it is laced with real events or sly historic fictions. Hence why its one truly unique creation is the character of Henry, America's oldest vampire. In the novel, it turns out Henry was one of the 117 settlers who vanished on Roanoke. Further, "CRO" did not

begin the word “Croatoan” at all, but was rather the start of “CROWLEY,” because in this book, the Roanoke Colony’s doctor was named Crowley... and Crowley got his MD in draining throats!

It was Crowley who killed the colony, including Henry. Crowley, of course, did not finish the young lad, because he would be too lonely without a companion; instead, he turned him with the sweet embrace of the living dead. He even thought about sparing Virginia Dare too since she represented the New World’s promise—but then he eats the baby as a snack later.

At least that was the end of Virginia until Grahame-Smith published a sequel, *The Last American Vampire*. This 2015 novel follows Henry as the central protagonist and reveals that he lied about the death of Virginia Dare; he has actually raised her secretly as his eternal daughter, a young woman he has kept Sweet 16 through the centuries. They inevitably turn on each other like any good Anne Rice pairing would.



Wraiths of Roanoke

At the very least winning points in the creativity column, *Wraiths of Roanoke* (also known as *The Lost Colony*) was the Sci-Fi Channel original movie that penned the vanishing of Raleigh’s charter on Vikings. Ghost Vikings, at that. Yep.

In this ill-advised 2007 TV movie—back from a time when “Syfy” spelled its name correctly—Adrian Paul of *Highlander* fame plays Ananias Dare, the husband of Eleanor Dare and father to little Virginia. He is left in charge of the colony while John White is away, and slowly realizes his neighbors are dying one by one in the woods under supernatural circumstances. As it turns

out, Roanoke was the site of torture and execution amongst the Vikings who just happened to be paddling by. They slowly killed their worst companions on this island, and now their ghosts haunt what is left.

In the end, the ghosts are defeated by a mortally wounded Ananias tricking them into a Viking funeral. As the last adult colonist alive, he sets his child adrift in the coastal waters. Virginia is subsequently discovered and raised by Manteo.



FreakyLinks

As one of the many, many forgotten TV shows fallen to obscurity, **FreakyLinks** was Fox's attempt to make a *totally extreme* series based on popular trends in 2000. Hence, the short-lived 13-episode run tried to marry the structure of **The X-Files** with the *rad* found footage angle kids were so digging from 1999's **The Blair Witch Project**. In this TV series, Ethan Embry, Lisa Sheridan, and Karim Prince attempt to investigate urban legends and discover their dark secrets while posting all their footage on the website "FreakyLinks.com."

While the full extent of the show's central mystery remains unsolved due to cancellation, it is revealed that the brother of Embry's character, who started the Freaky Links website, died while investigating the disappearance of the Lost Colony; it is also revealed that Virginia Dare is some kind of demon who caused the colonists deaths and lives still, presumably murdering the protagonist's brother. This storyline never got exorcised further once the show too vanished into the wilderness.



Sleepy Hollow

In the first season of this Fox genre mash-up, it is revealed early that the Legend of Sleepy Hollow and the Legend of Roanoke are irrevocably linked. Apparently, the biblical Horseman of Pestilence (the third Horseman of the Apocalypse) visited Roanoke shortly after its founding and infected the settlers with plague. The first of them to die was Virginia Dare, who despite being a baby somehow came back as the ghost of a little girl. The spectral Dare led the rest of the colonists into the woods and... to Upstate New York?

Yeah, it gets murky. But apparently they walked from present day North Carolina to the wilderness of modern New York, and have existed in the ensuing centuries forevermore as semi-ghosts comprised of flesh and blood—waiting on the outskirts of the Hudson River Valley that would birth the Headless Horseman legend. Waiting for the End of Days.



Haven

While the show is ostensibly based on a 2005 Stephen King novel named ***The Colorado Kid*** and is set in Maine, this Syfy series has gotten in on the Lost Colony action too. Early in this series, a character has a dream about the Colony of Roanoke and sees a vision of a tree carved with the word "Croatoan." Carvings of the word Croatoan repeatedly appear until it is revealed that it signifies not a place or people, but rather a monster. Aye, there is a Croatoan monster going around killing folks, and that presumably might be somehow related to the vanishing colonists.



American Horror Story

This brings us full-circle to ***American Horror Story***, which actually has played in the myths about Roanoke long before season 6. In point of fact, the mysterious fate of these residents on the barrier islands has been in the anthological series' DNA since the very beginning!

Back during ***AHS'*** first and best season, the tension and scares weren't just systematic, they were tightly woven into the characters' DNA and a strong narrative. One such creation is Sarah Paulson's bargain bin psychic, who upon first glance seems a charlatan yet proves to be anything but. In the penultimate episode, Paulson stops the proceedings in the haunted, proverbial "Murder House" to explain to Jessica Lange and her already deceased, ghostly neighbor the story of Roanoke, "the Ghost Colony."

In the the words of ***American Horror Story***: "In 1590, on the coast of what we now know as North Carolina, the Colony of Roanoke, all 117 men, women, and children, died inexplicably. It became known as the Ghost Colony, because the spirits remained. They haunted the Native tribes living in the surrounding area, killing indiscriminately. The elder [Native American] knew he had to act: he cast a banishment curse. First, he collected all the personal belongings of the dead colonists, then they burned them. The ghosts appeared, summoned by their talismans. But before the spirits could cause them anymore harm, the elder completed the curse that would banish the ghosts forever by uttering a single word—the same word carved on a post in the abandoned colony. 'Croatoan.'"

But in season 6, they're back. And this time, they are ghosts that haunt the further-inland shores of coastal North Carolina, stuck perpetually as damnable spirits, because John White's wife dubiously made a deal with a witch, who is in point of fact Lady Gaga (don't ask). As a result, they apparently haunt the backwoods of NC, slaughtering random passerbys every October in a form of ritualistic human sacrifice that will please the

blood moon whose magic is derived from old pagan gods. Uh-huh.

Still, the legend of Roanoke lives once more! It always will.

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