

Lane, Sir Ralph ^[1]

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by John W. Shirley, 1991

ca. 1530–October 1603

See also: [Ralph Lane](#) ^[2], Research Branch, NC Office of Archives and History



Map of the Roanoke area by John White, 1585. Image from the Wikimedia Commons.

^[3]Sir Ralph Lane, first governor of "Virginia," was born in Lymptstone, Devonshire, England, the son of Sir Ralph Lane (d. 1541) and his wife Maud Parr (daughter of William Lord Parr) of North-amptonshire. He is believed to have been a cousin of [Edward Dyer](#) ^[4], the poet. In 1563 he entered the service of Queen Elizabeth I as equerry and did a variety of court tasks, including searching Breton ships for illegal goods in 1571. In general, however, Lane was better suited as a soldier than as a courtier. After serving as [sheriff](#) ^[5] of County Kerry, Ireland, from 1583 to 1585, he was invited by Sir [Walter Raleigh](#) ^[6] to command an expedition to America. He sailed on 9 Apr. 1585 under [Sir Richard Grenville](#) ^[7], with whom he soon began to quarrel. Towards the end of June, they arrived at Wococon on the North Carolina [Outer Banks](#) ^[8] and established a colony with Lane as governor.

After Grenville departed for England in August, the colony moved to [Roanoke Island](#) ^[9] where it remained for the next eight months. As supplies became scarce, the colony was plagued with bickering and quarrels among its members and with the natives. Lane reportedly was not diplomatic in dealing with the Indians and often reacted violently to provocation. He

quarreled with Wingina ^[10], an Indian chief, who was attempting to organize neighboring tribes to attack Lane's group. Lane solved this problem by killing Wingina on 10 June 1586 before the surrounding tribes convened and then managed to disperse the rest of the group. The next day, 11 June, Sir Francis Drake ^[11] arrived and promised to leave men, supplies, and a ship. However, a hurricane blew the ship out to sea and plans were changed. Lane, discouraged, decided to return to England. In the frenzied rush to be gone, three colonists, exploring up-country, were left behind, and in an effort to lighten the ship's load, valuable records were destroyed or thrown over-board. Lane returned to England on 27 July 1586 and never again commanded a colonial expedition, probably to the benefit of everyone. Ironically, Grenville's relief squadron arrived shortly after Drake sailed for home, causing widespread criticism of Lane for leaving Virginia when he did. It has even been suggested that Lane's distrust of Grenville led to his abandoning the colony.

It is thought (without much proof) that Lane was the first to introduce tobacco ^[12] to England. Following his return, Lane set down a "Discourse on the First Colony," which was sent to Sir Walter Raleigh and later printed in Richard Hakluyt's *Principall Navigations* (1589). Afterwards, Lane wrote another treatise on his experiences as a colonial commander and sent it to Lord Burghley on 7 Jan. 1592. In it he emphasized the need for strict discipline to avoid illness among the soldiers.

Among the colonists of this Virginia expedition were John White ^[13], an artist, and Thomas Harriot ^[14], a mathematician, who took meticulous notes and made remarkably accurate drawings of the wildlife, fauna, and natives of the New World. These efforts have been preserved in their book, *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia* ^[15], published in 1588 and 1590. Lane wrote the foreword to this book.

After Lane's return to England, he performed a series of petty tasks for the court, including in 1588 the office of muster-master of the camp at West Tilbury in Essex and the next year as muster-master general of the army on the Spanish and Portuguese coast. In January 1592 he took the post of muster-master general and clerk of the check in Ireland. He remained in that country for the rest of his life.

Lane apparently never married but continued, as he had throughout his career, to beg favors from the well-placed for himself and his relatives. On 15 Oct. 1593 he was knighted by the lord deputy of Ireland, Sir William Fitzwilliam. In 1594 Lane was badly wounded in an Irish rebellion. He never regained his strength and his office was generally neglected during the last years of his life. Edward E. Hale summed up his career: "He seems to have been an eager courtier, a bold soldier, a good disciplinarian, an incompetent governor, a credulous adventurer, and on the whole, though not a worthless, an unsuccessful man."

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Additional Resources:

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