

Fernandez, Simon ^[1]



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Simon Fernandez

Navigator, Privateer—and Villain?

By Dr. E. Thomson Shields Jr.

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The way stories are told affects the way people see history. One example is the case of Simon Fernandez, the navigator who in 1587 guided the group that became the [Lost Colony](#) ^[2] to [Roanoke Island](#) ^[3]. Writers often portray Fernandez as a greedy, self-serving pirate or privateer (a pirate officially approved by a government to attack other countries' ships). But the few facts we know paint a much more complicated picture of the man. So how did he get his reputation?

Fernandez came from the Portuguese Atlantic islands of the Azores. We don't know when he was born, but by 1571, he was working with the British pirate John Callis. Because they attacked mainly French and Spanish ships, the British government allowed the pair to operate out of British ports. Even when he was jailed for piracy, Fernandez had influential people get him out of jail. From 1579 to 1583, he sailed for several people in [Sir Walter Raleigh](#) ^[4]'s circle, including Raleigh himself. On these voyages, Fernandez traveled to the West Indies, the northeast coast of North America, and the spice-rich Moluccas Islands of the Pacific Ocean.

Fernandez is most famous as the pilot for the 1584, 1585, and 1587 expeditions sponsored by Raleigh to Roanoke Island. During the last expedition, he was described as self-centered and unconcerned about the colonists. The person who writes about him that way is [John White](#) ^[5], the colony's governor. White accuses Fernandez of purposely leaving the colonists on Roanoke Island, rather than continuing along to the Chesapeake Bay, where they were supposed to land. White reports that Fernandez claimed he left the colonists at Roanoke because he needed to set sail quickly to avoid the coming hurricane season, which would make the return voyage dangerous. But White implies that Fernandez really was anxious to return to sea to engage in piracy and make money.

White's main concern was the well-being of the colonists he had brought to the New World, including his pregnant daughter and her husband. Fernandez's main concern was the well-being of the ships and men under his command. Therefore, it is hard to judge how the men's versions of the events fit together. We have only White's report on Fernandez's version, so White's version has taken stronger hold on people's imaginations. In fact, for the past seventy summers, White has been portrayed as a kindly, long-suffering father and grandfather in the outdoor drama *The Lost Colony*—while Fernandez has been portrayed as an evil villain.

Note the name: Fernandez himself signed his name using the mixed Portuguese and Spanish form Simão Fernandez, but it was common during the period for people to have their names changed based on who was writing them. Fernandez was usually Simon in English texts, and his last name was written as Fernandez, Fernandes, Fernando, Ferdinando, Fernand, and Fardinando.

At the time of this article's publication, Dr. E. Thomson Shields Jr. worked as an associate professor of English at [East Carolina University](#) ^[6].

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1 January 2007 | Shields, E. Thomson, Jr.

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