



## The signatories: Gorges

Ferdinando Gorges grew up a “West Country” boy, inspired by the exploits of Queen Elizabeth’s already-legendary West Country “sea dogs” - the Gilbert brothers (John, Humphrey and Adrian), Sir Walter Raleigh, Francis Drake, John Hawkins and Sir Richard Grenville. These daring and gallant heroes of privateering exploits had made their names by striking terror into Spanish hearts and by spearheading England’s colonial expansion through exploration and colonizing adventures.

All were loosely related – including young Ferdinando - and all shared a love of the sea, bold and intrepid characters, a yearning for profit and a strong sense of English identity.

Despite his seafaring heritage, however, Gorges first made his mark as an army man. Born in 1568, he began his military career at the age of 19, serving with the English forces sent to aid the Dutch in their war with Spain. When the Spanish captured the Dutch town of Sluys, Gorges was taken prisoner. He was exchanged for prisoners from the Armada and cited for his valiant behavior.

On his return to England in 1589, he married for the first time (he was ultimately to marry 4 wives), gaining land in Sussex sufficient to support a less adventuresome soul as a comfortable country gentleman. Gorges, however, continued to pursue a military career, serving for the next two years in the English armies sent to support Henri IV of France. His distinguished service at the siege of Rouen in 1591 brought him to the attention of the Elizabeth’s dashing young favorite, Robert Devereaux, Earl of Essex, who knighted him and supported his advancement.

On Essex’s recommendation, in 1596 Gorges became captain and keeper of the castle and fort of the English seacoast town of Plymouth, charged with strengthening its naval defenses. Gorges never retreated from the sea thereafter.

Gorges held the Plymouth post almost continuously until 1629; he also accompanied Essex on his unsuccessful expedition to intercept a Spanish treasure fleet off the Azores in 1596.

He was not with Essex in 1599, however, when Essex led an army into Ireland to suppress the rebellious Irish Earl of Tyrone. Essex made peace with Tyrone – against Elizabeth’s explicit orders – and sailed home for England. A furious Elizabeth banished Essex from court and stripped him of his offices (and income). Essex sought the assistance of Gorges as he began to plot against the Queen and her ministers, writing: "For I have 120 Earls, Barons, and Gentlemen that participate in my discontented humor and will join with me; and I desire your help and counsel therein."

Gorges attended some of the discussions that led to the Essex Rebellion but withdrew from the conspiracy as plans became firmer. The plan went forward, the rebellion was unsuccessful – Essex and his supporters could not rouse the populace of London against the Queen. Essex was arrested, tried for treason and found guilty (Gorges testified against Essex at his trial), and executed at the Tower of London in 1601. Gorges was arrested

and imprisoned, but only briefly; he was soon returned to his post at Plymouth.

James I, who succeeded Elizabeth, implemented an uneasy peace with Spain. Voyages attacking Spanish shipping were now frowned upon and English privateers turned their attention to voyages of exploration and discovery.

In 1605, Gorges helped sponsor an expedition to the mouth of the Kennebec River in Maine. When the leader of the expedition, George Weymouth, returned to England with five Native American men, Gorges took three of them into his home. Gorges taught them English, they taught him about the New World. Gorges' fascination turned into all-consuming interest in promoting English settlements in America.

Gorges gathered a group of like-minded men, including Sir John Popham (the Lord Chief Justice), Sir George Somers (a successful privateer and naval commander) and Richard Hakluyt (an educator and geographer who had edited several very influential books on exploratory voyages) into a company and petitioned the crown for permission to establish settlements in North America.

In 1606, James I signed the first charter authorizing North American colonies. More than that, he signed two! Two separate Virginia Companies were established, both with royal charters, splitting the monopoly on British North America. One was the Virginia Company of London, the other the Virginia Company of Plymouth (England). The Virginia Company of Plymouth, with which Gorges was associated, was assigned the northerly areas (from southern New Jersey to Maine); the Virginia Company of London the southern areas (from the Carolinas to northern New Jersey).

In that same year, an expedition under the auspices of the Virginia Company of London sailed for "southern Virginia," founding the colony of Jamestown in the spring of 1607.

In 1607, the Virginia Company of Plymouth sponsored an expedition, led by Raleigh Gilbert (son of Sir Humphrey Gilbert and nephew of Humphrey's younger half-brother Sir Walter Raleigh) and George Popham (a relative of the Lord Chief Justice). The colonists sailed for "northern Virginia," arriving in what is now Maine on August 1. There they built the Fort of St. George and established the "Popham Colony." The ensuing winter was severe and many of the colonists (including George Popham) died. When spring came Raleigh Gilbert learned of the death of his older brother and returned to England to claim his inherited estate. The entire remaining colony went with him.

The failure of the Popham Colony after only a year had a discouraging effect on English colonization in northern Virginia. For the next 13 years, there were no significant colonizing ventures in northern Virginia.

The demise of the Popham Colony was also a personal defeat for Gorges, who had been a major backer of the colony and chief spokesperson for the Virginia Company of Plymouth.

Gorges, however, did not allow defeat to stop him. He continued to fit out ships for fishing, trading and exploring, all the time with colonization in view. Not all of his efforts were successful – many of the attempted voyages were cut short for a variety of reasons – but he persevered. Eventually, in 1616 and in 1619, two of Gorges' ships did manage to sail to New England and return.

The poor record of success, however, forced the Virginia Company of Plymouth to reorganize and, in November of 1620, to reconstitute itself as the Council for New England. Gorges was largely responsible for the creation of this new corporation. The first patent granted by the Council was to a little group of settlers who had unexpectedly settled within the boundaries of New England – the *Mayflower* Pilgrims. Landing north of their intended landfall, the colonists asked the Council for permission to remain in Plymouth and were granted the Peirce Patent in 1621.

Gorges described the Pilgrims' request for the patent in his account of his colonizing ventures, entitled *A brief narrative of the original undertakings of the advancement of plantations into the parts of America; especially shewing the beginning, progress and continuance of that of New-England* (first printed in 1658):

*"...the coast of New England, where they landed their people, many of them weak and feeble through the length of the navigation, the leakiness of the ship, and want of many other necessaries such undertakings required; but they were not many days ashore before they had gotten both health and strength, through the comfort of the air, the store of fish and fowl, with plenty of wholesome roots and herbs the country afforded; besides the civil respect the Natives used towards them, tending much to their happiness in so great extremity they were in, after they had well considered the state of their affairs and found that the authority they had from the Company of Virginia could not warrant their abode in that place, which they found so prosperous and pleasing to them, they hastened away their ship, with order to their solicitor to deal with me, to be a means they might have a grant from the Council of New England's affairs to settle in the place, which was accordingly performed to their particular satisfaction and good content of them all, which place was after called New-Plymouth, where they have continued ever since very peaceable, and in all plenty of all necessaries that nature needeth, if that could satisfy our vain affections, where I will leave them for the present."*

In 1623, Gorges sent his son Robert to Massachusetts Bay with a patent from the Council for New England that not only gave him control of the entire North Shore area but also gave him the magnificent title "general governor of the country." Robert soon quarreled with Thomas Weston, who had settled at Wessagusset. William Bradford notes, with a touch of sly humor, that "The Governor [Robert Gorges] and some that depended upon him returned for England, having scarcely saluted the country in his government, not finding the state of things here to answer his quality and condition."

Young Robert's attitude, so subtly mocked by Bradford, mirrored one of his father's chief shortcomings.

Gorges was never able to make the mental transition from a feudal and royalist viewpoint to the more democratic viewpoint necessary for a successful colonizing venture. He looked on settlements as aristocratic undertakings and expected them to be governed by the practices of feudalism. He even proposed on several occasions that settlers should be regarded as tenants, not as landholders, and that they should be tied to the land where they were "planted." This was certainly not the spirit that encouraged families to emigrate to America. And it certainly was not the understanding of the Pilgrims. A letter written in 1621 by William Hilton, a passenger in the *Fortune*, specifically says "We are all freeholders; the rent-day doth not trouble us."

It is no surprise, therefore, that Gorges found himself regularly at odds with Massachusetts Bay Colony, incorporated in 1628 by independent Puritan thinkers and holding its own patent for land that Gorges regarded as his. Gorges tried to gain the revocation of the Massachusetts Bay charter and found an ally in Archbishop Laud, who created the Commission for Foreign Plantations to oversee England's overseas colonies. Gorges' push to establish royal control over New England led to the dissolution of the Council for New England in 1635. The Council resigned its charter to the king, leading to the resumption of royal control – in theory, at least – over the whole area.

Gorges now launched a campaign to be named royal governor of all New England and to be supported in that office by a proprietary province – the Province of Maine.

Gorges' interest in the New World had first been piqued by the 1605 Weymouth voyage to Maine – and Maine was never to leave Gorges' thoughts. In 1622, the year after the Peirce Patent was granted, Gorges had received (with a partner, John Mason) a grant for the territory lying between the Merrimack and Kennebec Rivers. Because of European conflicts, the grant could not be pursued until 1629, when Gorges and Mason divided the land, Gorges taking that east of the Piscataqua River, which became the Province of Maine. Gorges began to slowly make land grants, encouraging settlers, and financing fishing stations.

Gorges did receive a royal charter for Maine in 1639 that gave him extraordinary governmental powers that could be inherited by his heirs or assigns, setting up – in effect – an American hereditary nobility. Gorges hoped to someday travel to America to claim his new lands but, in the meantime, sent a cousin, Thomas Gorges, as deputy governor.

The looming English Civil War, and the struggle between Charles I and Parliament, put an end to Gorges' hopes, both for his personal governorship in Maine as well as the establishment of royal control over New England.

During the ensuing war, Gorges was an active supporter of the royal cause. He raised a cavalry troop in support of the king and took part in military actions well into his 70s. His cousin, Thomas Gorges, in contrast, returned from Maine to England in 1643 to serve on the winning parliamentary side.

Gorges died in 1647, disappointed and impoverished. His grant passed to his heirs. Maine had been almost entirely absorbed by Massachusetts during the 1650s and Gorges' grandson, another Ferdinando, finally sold all his Maine rights to Massachusetts in 1677 for £1,250.

Ferdinando Gorges today is little remembered. He founded no permanent colonies and most of his ventures were failures. His legacy rests on his enthusiastic and visionary support for other, more successful enterprises.

Ferdinando Gorges said of himself (in modernized English)

*“I dealt not as merchants or tradesmen are wont, seeking only to make my own profit, my ends being to make perfect the thorough discovery of the Country (wherein I waded so far with the help of those that joined with me) as I opened the way for others, to make their gain, which has been the means to encourage their followers to prosecute it to their advantage.”*